and last bet is his blood

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/62231116.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Squid Game (TV 2021)
Relationship:	Hwang Inho | Front Man/Seong Gihun
Character:	The Salesman (Squid Game)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Vampire, Vampire Hwang In-ho, Predator/Prey, Vampire Bites, Blood Drinking, Gentleman Hwang In-ho, Season 1 Seong Gi-hun, Hurt/Comfort, Not Beta Read, Explicit Consent, Angst with a Happy Ending, Attempt at Humor, I love Hannibal and trust me guys it shows, Self-Harm, But its really just a way to seduce a vampire, Gambling, Love Letters, Smoking, Flirting, Top Hwang Inho | Front Man (Squid Game), Top Seong Gihun, Bottom Hwang Inho | Front Man (Squid Game), Bottom Seong Gihun, they switch, Orgasm Control, Blow Jobs, Anal Sex, Teasing
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2025-01-14 Completed: 2025-02-11 Words: 47,203 Chapters: 10/10

and last bet is his blood

by JodyJuliana

Summary

Seong Gi-hun is deep in debt that he can't pay off on his own, so he doesn't find it in himself to turn down a rather mysterious offer to spend a week with a man who is willing to pay generously for his time. He takes the risk, and then does it again and again while In-ho watches and teases him. As the vampire sinks his fangs into the man's neck, he thinks he is the one in control, completely oblivious to the rope rapidly wrapping around his own neck. Luckily for him, Gi-hun himself doesn't know that he's the one holding the other end of his leash.

Notes

well well well, here I am again, writing new vampire!au fic
hope you'll like it!

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Chapter 1

You don't have to be a genius to be disappointed in humanity. All it takes is just opening your eyes, reading the news, walking down the street. It doesn't matter what country those people are from, whether they're rich or poor, old or young. In essence, they all repeat the same mistakes, find themselves addicted to the same things, and they likewise face failure if they try to fix any of it. In-ho realized this while he was still young, when he lost his wife, his job, when he found himself at the rock bottom. He had accepted that feeling of disappointment, but in the back of his mind he had always longed to find someone who could convince him that the world wasn't so doomed after all.

He didn't believe in God, he didn't believe in the end of the world or the second coming. All he had to hope for, furtively and in silence, was that someday there would be someone in his life who would help him see something bright in the world. He had never sought out that someone, never made any effort to do so, certain that it was a foolish and doomed venture, and that trying it was entirely contrary to everything he knew, to logic and common sense. And yet, whenever he wandered out onto the streets, into the city's darkest places, he couldn't stop watching. Observing. It was as if some part of his mind was convinced that if he saw the right person, he'd know right away. It was stupid. He berated himself each time for his foolish hope, yet he kept looking anyway.

Slipping through the nighttime backstreets like a shadow, he sometimes passed bars and similar establishments that were definitely not the right places to look for the best in a man. Through decades of observing humanity, In-ho had become convinced that humanity was pathetic. And now, while watching a man running from someone, that word comes across his mind again - pathetic.

This man almost knocks him down, accidentally crashing into him in this semi-darkness, not even illuminated by a street lamp. In-ho doesn't lose his balance, stopping him by reflex and grabbing him by the shoulders, immediately hearing the man's hurried and almost unintelligible speech, begging for pardon. The man doesn't wait for a response though, quickly glancing back at those chasing him and, apologizing again, runs further away. In-ho stares after him thoughtfully as the three menacing-looking men run past. It doesn't take a genius to realize that those are the creditors tired of waiting for their precious money to be returned to them.

In-ho thinks about just walking away, but the life of a vampire involves a certain kind of predatory instincts that are very hard to resist at times. Some of them - the reaction to fleeing prey, to the scent of frightened victim - are bubbling up inside him now, causing him to bare and then hide his fangs. He exhales, calming himself mentally, but then he hears a familiar voice nearby, begging not to be killed, and decides to follow after all.

No sooner does he round the corner than the faint odor of fresh blood hits his nose. He peers into the dead end where the victim has been driven and realizes that one of the men seems to have punched the guy in the face, smashing his nose - he immediately begins to whimper and

howl in pain, covering his face with his hands. In-ho is still standing in the shadows, unseen by the men, watching the scene unfold before his eyes.

“Let me see,” the one who punched him says with a sneer, and, as the debtor hesitates to lift his head, touches a trace of blood from his nose with his finger. He brings it to his mouth, tasting it. “Sweet,” he grins. “You must've been eating well on my money” the man scoffs, confirming all of In-ho's guesses, then gestures to one of his buddies and he holds out a knife to him. The cornered man howls and shakes. He's so pathetic it's ridiculous - and he keeps begging to be released, to not be killed, promising he'll pay back all the money if he's given a little more time. In-ho thinks about just letting it go, letting natural selection do its thing, but somehow the sight of this pathetic man, his tears, the way one of the men is holding him by his thick dark hair, not letting him move, makes him feel suddenly hungry, even though he had just drunk the donated blood of one of his servants a couple of hours ago. It made him want to scratch his fangs, to pierce the skin of this shaky, pathetic mess of a man who was at rock bottom because of his own human nature. It would be a waste of blood to let him die like this.

He's already making a step, but then the man seems to curve his lips and soften, putting the knife away and beckoning to his other apprentice. The man hands him a clipboard of some sort. “Put your fingerprint here. If you don't pay me back by next month, I'll take your kidney and your eye. You get it?” he asks, but takes too long to get an answer. “What, you don't like it?” he brings the knife up to the man's face again, and he immediately flinches.

“Yes, yes, I get it, I get it!” he says hastily, and the knife is taken away from his face after all. Trembling, he stains his finger with his own blood still pouring from his nose and then leaves his fingerprint on the paper. Only then does his creditor grin, stroking his hair contentedly.

“Good boy. You've got a month. Take care of yourself - *for me* , Seong Gi-hun” he scowls, finally letting go of the man and turning around, walking away with his gang.

The man, shaking, slides down the wall, landing on the dirty pavement, trembling with the fear that hasn't let go of him yet. In-ho watches him from the side, remaining in the shadows, gradually regaining his usual collectedness. It was foolish to come here like this, he realizes now - it's not in his nature to go on a scavenger hunt like some kind of kite. He's a civilized creature, after all.

He watches the man from the sidelines, as if he's found a new hobby. He's never once noticed. This goes on for a few days, the end of the month getting closer and closer, and by the looks of it, Gi-hun begins to fall more and more into sweet despair. A couple times he tries to bet his last money on horses. Each time, only loss awaited him. He needed money, lots of it and fast, and he couldn't find it, couldn't manage to make that much even if he tried. He was doomed. In-ho watches the irreversible approach of another's doom - and the funny thing is, he can do something about it. And he does.

His assistant finds Seong Gi-hun late at night in an empty subway station, offering him a game with a chance to make money. A gambler like Gi-hun can't help but fall for such a hook, and when he loses and finds himself with nothing to give in return, his assistant only smirks slightly. “You can pay with your body.”

He enjoys the look of genuine surprise - but not instant rejection - on Gi-hun's face for a couple moments, and then slaps him. They play many rounds, the man's cheek turning red, he occasionally fixes his hair before taking another blow, flinching adorably cute when the assistant reaches for a swing. In-ho watches the recording of all this while sitting in his office, holding a glass of blood in his hand and tracing the rim of it with his finger, deep in thought. Simple blood donation is no longer able to satisfy him. Something must be done about it.

When Gi-hun finally wins, he's already swinging at the man in the suit, but the man deftly stops his hand by grabbing his wrist and then hands him the money. The man looks so confused, as if he'd forgotten he was doing all this for a hundred thousand won. They play a few more rounds, he gets slapped, gets more money, which he then counts while sitting on the bench again. In-ho is somehow sure that he's not thinking at this point about how much more he needs to pay off his debts - more like, with this kind of luck, it would be a good idea to go bet on a new horse to make sure he has enough. People are always extremely predictable.

“You know,” his assistant begins, closing his briefcase, ”if you want to earn a lot more, my boss would be happy to offer you that opportunity, Seong Gi-hun.”

“How do you know my name?” the man's eyes immediately flicker with fear, incredulity causing him to change his pose slightly. The assistant only smiles all the same, calling his full name again and then accurately stating the amount he owes.

“You recently signed a waiver of your physical rights, correct?” the aide calmly clarifies. “You need to pay off your debts by the end of the month or your life can be considered… well, over. My boss is willing to pay you seven billion won, that will be enough to both pay off all your debts and try to make a fresh start if you are smart enough to do so,” he pulls out a business card with a number from his pocket.

“Why would your boss be throwing around that kind of money? What kind of sick games are there?” Gi-hun sits down farther away from him on a bench.

“You will only be required to spend one week in his company. You will be able to walk away at any time if you don't want to agree to anything he may want to demand of you” the young vampire replies calmly. “We guarantee the safety of your life and that no irreparable harm will be done to your health. At the end of each day you will have the opportunity to leave with what you have earned - one billion won will be deposited into your bank account each day. If you want to leave after your first night, you'll leave with one billion won. After the third one, with three billion,” the assistant explains, easily noticing how other's eyes light up at the mention of such sums. “My boss is a very lonely and bored man, Mr. Seong Gi-hun,” he says a little quieter, tilting his head slightly without breaking his attentive gaze. “You can give him something, and he can give something to you. Think about it,” the young man stands up from the bench, adjusting his jacket, looking down at Gi-hun. “But not for too long. In nine days, the people you owe money to will come after you. Don't forget about that”.

He hands him a business card as he walks away, and after that, all that's left to do is wait. His assistant receives the long-awaited call early the next morning, and within twenty minutes of that call a car pulls up to the man's house. The use of sedative gas is only a reasonable

precaution, absolutely safe for his health, and in a few hours he is taken to the island where In-ho's mansion was located. Until recently it had belonged to his father - not his biological one, of course, but the one who had turned him about half a century ago - but he had killed himself, tired of eternal life. So now all of his accumulated fortune had fallen into the hands of his main and, due to certain circumstances, only heir.

It was definitely more convenient for vampires to live not in the city, but far away from unnecessary eyes, and underground. Once it was caves, now it was a high-tech bunker with all possible facilities. In-ho appreciates progress.

It was rare for vampires to turn humans, so there weren't many in his entourage, and all of them were turned by him, because a vampire always stays loyal to the one who turned him. His chief assistant had earned that honor through years of loyal service, and In-ho had chosen him first out of all the candidates as soon as he had become the owner of this estate, this family. The people existing in his service still kept hoping that someday this rather dubious luck would favor them as well, but for now, In-ho was in no hurry to waste his resources on them.

In the meantime, his chief assistant was calmly preparing to explain the more definite rules of the game to the guest who had finally come to his senses. When Gi-hun comes out of his room, clearly distrustful and wary of everything around him, he meets him on the first floor of the spacious living room. “Ah, Mr. Seong Gi-hun! It's good to see you're already awake. Please have a seat,” he points to the chair opposite with a smile.

“You kidnapped me” the man says, taking his time to come closer and still looking around the room somewhat uncertainly. It was rather gloomy in here, the yellowish light was only from the lamp on the table near the chair, and the overhead light didn't illuminate the place enough to see everything any better.

“We apologize for all the inconveniences, but this was an unfortunate necessity. My boss prefers to be assured of an extreme degree of privacy about what takes place here, mainly for your own safety,” the young man said. “You don't want to worry about accidentally revealing extremely important and sensitive information to somebody else, do you?” he opens the latches on the briefcase, showing what's inside to the man hesitantly moving closer to the chair. There is a small formal contract inside.

Gi-hun exhales, sitting down after all in the chair opposite, but takes his time accepting the piece of paper from the hand held out to him. “What's this all about, really?” he asks, his incredulous gaze focused on the man in front of him. “You want to sell my organs? There's already a line for them, as far as I can tell”.

The assistant smiles patiently, putting the contract sheet back into his briefcase, leaving it on the table between them. “It's a little more complicated than that,” he replies calmly. “But you don't have to worry about your organs. The only sacrifice that will be required of you here is your blood. Think of it as a somewhat unusual form of donation. It's a noble way to make money, don't you think?”

Gi-hun frowns, clearly not quite understanding. “My blood?” is clearly not what he expected. “Why? I'm not even healthy enough for something like that, am I? My lifestyle isn't exactly...

a preferable one for donation," it's as if he's even embarrassed, he hides his gaze and rubs the outside of his palm with his fingers.

"It's a common misconception. At least in this case" the assistant smiles. "The physical characteristics of blood are not of drastic importance to us. Its flavor and ability to satiate is far more influenced by its spiritic characteristics, and yours are just perfect for my boss".

"Flavor?" Gi-hun is definitely confused, he blinks stupidly, not understanding what the madman in front of him is talking about. An awkward chuckle escapes his lips. "What are you people, some kind of vampires?"

The assistant smiles calmly. The silence makes Seong Gi-hun feel even stranger, but before he can awkwardly cough and ask another question, the young man already continues. "Every creature has some craving. A need that cannot be resisted because it is ingrained into our very essence. You have a craving for gambling. You're willing to take unjustifiable risks for it, and it's not about money, at least not just about it. As for creatures like me, or like my boss, we have a different kind of craving".

Gi-hun raises his eyebrows. "You... you really call yourselves vampires?" he clearly takes what is happening as a strange joke and even looks around fleetingly, as if expecting to see cameras or some sort of audience. An unsure chuckle leaves his lips.

The apprentice shrugs his shoulders. "It's what people have named us, among other things. It's just the most common name we have. But you don't need to delve into that politics, that's not why you're here," he smirks again, moving the opened briefcase with the contract lying there closer to him, and Gi-hun takes it but doesn't read it, looking at it confused. "You will be expected to provide a simple service. For seven days, you will keep my boss company as you would for your friend - talking, telling him about yourself. And, when he wants you to, you'll just let him drink your blood" he tells almost indifferently. "You'll get seven billion won at the end. We'll take you back to where we took you from and you won't be disturbed by us ever again. While you're here, your physical condition will be taken care of by our staff, and after... well, I think the prize money will be enough to fix any minor damage".

Gi-hun opens his mouth, looking at him in incomprehension, then still lowering his gaze to the sheet of contract in his hands. Pretty simple and general obligations of the parties, given what's been spoken, but of course without mentioning words like 'vampire'. Gi-hun shakes his head, chuckling. "What kind of nonsense is this, are you guys crazy or something? What blood, what vampires?" he throws the sheet on the table.

The young man across the table continues to look at him with a calm smile, and then something in his gaze seems to change and he tilts his head slightly to the side, looking intently into his face. "You must have recently injured your nose?" he suddenly asks, causing the man to become confused and silent. "A fresh wound opened up. From excitement, I believe," he says flatly, rising from his chair and pulling a white handkerchief from his chest pocket, coming decidedly closer and roughly grabbing him by the hair at the back of his neck, forcing him to lift his head; Gi-hun twitches, frightened, wanting to break free, but the hand holds firm, and the assistant's dilated pupils seem to make him freeze in place. "Let me..."

"Enough," a calm, commanding but soft voice sounds, and the assistant immediately lets go of his hair, raising his head and taking a step back. Seong Gi-hun also turns around at the sound, palm covering his lips and nose, feeling that he really is bleeding.

The figure of the man he doesn't know is mostly hidden in the shadows. He stands quietly at the door as if he had been there all along, miraculously avoiding anyone else's attention - an invisible observer, no less.

Another moment passes and he quietly takes a step closer, and in his hand the man notices a glass with something red in it. Gi-hun tries to look into his face, but somehow it's as if he can't, physically, and the mere attempt to focus on him gives him a sudden migraine, and he has to look away.

"I only wanted to help him, sir," the assistant excuses himself as In-ho comes closer, but he only calmly hands him the glass of blood.

"I know," he replies calmly. "You can go now, I'll take it from here," In-ho states, and the young man bows his head and obediently walks away, drinking the glass in a volley on his way to the door and placing it on the table near the exit.

As the door closes behind him, Gi-hun flinches again, sensing how close the yet unknown man is. He looks at him, but immediately closes his eyes again, turning away as if blinded by the bright sun.

"How do you do that?.." he asks in confusion, trying to look at him again.

The man calmly holds out a handkerchief to him, this time red, and he hesitantly takes it from his hands, bringing it up to his nose.

In-ho steps away from him to pour a new glass of water. "Don't try to see me, it will only make your headache worse" he advises. "You won't see my face unless I want you to".

"But... how?" Gi-hun clearly doesn't take his advice, once again trying to focus on the seemingly blurry silhouette now stopped near the bookshelf. He still fails to see the stranger's face.

"It's just a trick," In-ho replies, putting the decanter back down and turning to Gi-hun, walking calmly back closer to him and holding out a glass of water. "Once it was critical to survival for the likes of me, but now it helps even more than ever before" he waits for Gi-hun to take the glass before stepping back behind him so as not to loom in front of his eyes. His hands touch his shoulders a moment later, and Gi-hun flinches, startled, never taking a sip from the glass. "Predators hide in the bushes to choose the right moment to attack their dinner. In modern cities, we are deprived of the ability to organically hide anywhere but in the shadows of back alleys or in crowds. Ever get a headache while on a crowded subway or making your way down a busy avenue to your destination? Sometimes it just happens," he is silent for a few moments, then removes his hands from the man's body. "Have some water. You'll feel better".

"Who are you?" the fear in his voice is completely natural, and In-ho smiles faintly.

“You've already been told, haven't you?” he says, and then reaches out, fingertips touching the exposed neck. *“Or do I have to bite you to make you believe me?”* In-ho asks softly, smirking contentedly as the light, fleeting touch makes the man flinch. Goosebumps run down Gi-hun's back, and he already rushes to jump up to increase the distance between himself and the predatory animal in the room, but In-ho covers his shoulders confidently with his palms again in time, continuing to speak. “There's no need for that, trust me. Just relax, I'm not going to attack you from behind and without your consent. That would be *tasteless,”* he states. One of his hands leaves the man's shoulder and burrows into his soft hair. “You have a contract lying before you. Let's think of it all as a little game, what do you think? And you can lose in this game only if you don't choose to play it, otherwise you are guaranteed a prize. Stay with me for seven days and on the eighth day you'll wake up in your apartment with seven billion won in your account and a couple of harmless scars on your body that no one will even notice. The human psyche is used to ignoring things that make them feel uncomfortable, bite marks included".

From the way the man flinched as if in pain under his touch after a couple of moments, In-ho guessed that he had tried to see him in the reflection of the mirror that hung on the wall a few meters away from them.

“Not a great idea. *And why are you so eager to see my face, Mr. Seong Gi-hun?”* he asks, tilting his head to the side with a smirk. “I assure you, it's an ordinary one. It's nothing special. I'm not showing it only because it'll be easier for both of us later if you decline my offer”.

Instead of answering, Gi-hun swallows, then asks a new question. “Why me?” he asks, and, not getting an answer right away, continues. “That man. Back on the subway, he knew my name, knew about my debts. It wasn't a random choice. But why?”

In-ho hesitates, looking up, one hand continuing to stroke concentratedly through his hair. “Have you ever happened to see something and at the very same moment realize you need it badly, even if there's no real reason for it?” he asks, looking into his reflection, watching the tense, frozen man who seems to forbid himself from relaxing, no matter how gently he's being touched right now. “It's like I can still hear you making that... *beautiful, pitiful* sound, in that back alley” he says, and notices the shadow of surprise running across Gi-hun's face. “Yes. Remember when you crashed into someone because you didn't see them in the dark? And then you kept running, immediately forgetting about it, ignoring the pain in your head because you didn't care about it at the time? I followed you then. I wanted to see what would happen. And then I smelled your blood... for a brief moment I even considered saving you, killing them and drinking you dry, going against my principles, but luckily they gave you a reprieve on your debt, and I had a chance to come up with a more rational idea,” his hand slides out of his dark hair, touches with fingertips his cheek, covered in light sloppy stubble, and Gi-hun flinches as if trying to move away from the touch, but afraid to make any real effort. “You need money, I have plenty. Isn't that what they call a fair deal?”

He takes both hands away from the man, and he hears him exhale in the silence of the room, realizing that he was holding his breath this whole time. “I still don't understand why you would do this when you could... just take what you want,” his dry voice comes.

In-ho calmly reaches out to take the blood-stained handkerchief from him, and Gi-hun gives it back gingerly, but doesn't try to raise his gaze to his face again, staring at his shoes. In-ho smiles faintly. “I am not uncivilized. I am a man of strict principles. Some time ago, I was given a choice that changed my life, and ever since then I have felt it my duty to carry on that little tradition,” he says vaguely, turning away from him, bringing his handkerchief to his face, breathing in the familiar scent. In-ho stops near the painting hanging on the wall. “I don't do this just because I can or because of hunger. I have enough food provided to me on a voluntary basis as part of a sustainable contract with all my servants, I have donor's blood. But there are… certain features of my nature that I am forced to submit to, from time to time, just to feel healthy and stable. Spot, hunt, capture, drink,” he tucks the handkerchief quietly away in his chest pocket. “Almost like a child's game of chase. Innocent and safe. I have good self-control, you have nothing to worry about”.

“So I'm supposed to just... trust you that you care about my safety?” Gi-hun asks with a faint chuckle, again in that husky voice, but then drinks the water from the glass finally. In-ho smirks without turning back to him.

“You already trusted me when you agreed to come here,” he remarks. “Don't you think that if I wanted to kill you, I'd just do it without wasting time giving you a chance to decline my offer and leave?”

Gi-hun remains silent, pursing his lips and staring into the empty glass of water. His long hair covers his face and In-ho turns, looking at him again, tilting his head with an interest that was almost unfamiliar to him.

“There's no shame in it, you know,” he remarks calmly. “At least, no more than in any of your other attempts to make money, whether it's betting on horses or getting slapped on a half-empty subway at night”.

“Sounds like you kind of think there is,” Gi-hun replies a little irritably.

“That's the opposite of what I said,” In-ho remarks without a moment's hesitation. “You need money. I can give it to you in exchange for what I need. That's simple capitalism, the way our world works. It may not be perfect, but there's nothing we can do about it anyway. There's no shame in pursuing easy money. It's... just a human nature”.

Silence covers the room. Gi-hun stares at the contract in his hands, but as In-ho takes another step closer, he suddenly stands up from his chair as if trying to create more distance between them, furtively only glancing in his direction through the dark wavy strands that hide his face. The page still in his hands, it trembles faintly. “So I can leave if I want to? Like, tomorrow? And you'll just let me?” he asks.

In-ho is sure that Gi-hun won't leave. He smiles patiently, knowing the man can't see his face yet. “I will ask you a question at the end of each day. If you say you want to end this, I'll hand you over to my assistant and he'll take you home, safe and sound, and you'll never see me again”.

Gi-hun stares at the sheet in his hands, both of them silent again. In-ho watches him from a few feet away, almost hearing his heart beating now, the gears turning in his head. And then,

finally, he hears an exhale, doomed or determined, or maybe all of the above together. Then the man's gaze slides awkwardly around the room, avoiding him. “Uh...” he begins uncertainly, ”can you give me a pen?”

In-ho smirks slightly, taking a calm step, shortening the distance between them, and pulls out a folding knife from his pocket, easily and deftly slicing Gi-hun's hand that was outstretched for the pen. The man cries out in sudden and quick pain, immediately removing his wounded hand and reflexively trying to look at In-ho's face, but the headache immediately reminds him of itself and he looks at the contract in front of him again.

“Here's your ink,” In-ho says calmly, and then watches as the man nods uncertainly and licks his lips, hesitating for a few more seconds before touching the right spot on the paper with his bloody finger. The vampire immediately relaxes a little, smirking, and takes the contract from the man's hands. *“Perfect”*.

“It's not like it actually has legal obligations,” Gi-hun awkwardly remarks. “Right?”

“Of course it has none,” In-ho phlegmatically tosses the sheet aside somewhere, letting it fall to the floor. “This is merely the concept of a contract. Your agreement put into more or less substantial form,” he takes his wrist, forcing him to raise his bloody hand, and Gi-hun looks at him again, and this time he finally *sees* his face, immediately freezing as if he hadn't expected this.

In-ho doesn't react in any way, looking at the blood dripping from the fresh wound.

“Your consent is real, and so is my commitment. It's a game of trust,” he looks into his eyes, pulling his hand closer to his mouth at the same time and covers the wounded finger with his lips. He feels Gi-hun stop breathing.

His blood is pleasantly sweet on the man’s tongue. It may not be much, but he is not trying to satisfy his hunger now, he only tastes it, a small dose, an aperitif before the feast. He stops this touch without taking his gaze from Gi-hun's face, then allows himself to open his mouth slightly so he can see his fangs. The man immediately flinches fearfully with his whole body, trying to break free, and he lets him - Gi-hun slams his shoulder into the wall just a moment later. In-ho holds back a chuckle, limiting himself to a slight smirk.

“You should eat now,” he says, calmly glancing around him. “You will have dinner brought to your room, and I insist that you eat it all. I wouldn't want you to lose your strength from the first bite, and I believe you wouldn’t want it either”.

Nodding to him politely, lowering his gaze for a moment, he looks at him again before leaving the room, allowing him to finally be alone with all his thoughts and with the contract left carelessly on the floor.

Chapter 2

It's evening, and they both meet in the elevator leading out of the bunker. Gi-hun is visibly nervous under the vampire's attentive gaze, keeping a few steps distance between them. As far as In-ho's assistant had reported to him, the man had indeed eaten what had been prepared for him, even if he seemed a little unsure at first about whether he was about to be poisoned. He had also changed his clothes, now wearing a white shirt and black suit instead of his usual cheap gray suit and t-shirt, but even that didn't make him look confident and collected - his disheveled hair and awkward expression still gave away his familiar charm. He looks like a naive puppy.

The elevator doors open in front of them. In-ho exits first, walking to the end of the short hallway and gives a command through the walkie-talkie, after which the door to the outside opens in front of them. Gi-hun only now, observing the view from the bunker, realizes that they are very far away from Seoul and are on some island full of greenery.

He awkwardly looks outside, then hesitantly takes a step, as if not entirely sure if he's really allowed to go out. Once completely out, he turns around, realizing that In-ho is in no hurry to follow him. It puzzles him at first, but then he looks around again, and then realization hits him. “You can't go out in the sun?”

In-ho continues to stand on the threshold, looking at him calmly, and nods briefly. “That part about vampires is true. I am a creature of the night” he allows himself a weak smile. “And night will be upon us in a few minutes, so... *tick tock.”*

Gi-hun stares at him for a few more moments, and In-ho is curious what thoughts are going through his head before he still convinces himself to turn his back to him and walk away towards the dense forest, shielding his face from the tall bushes bent on piercing his eyes with their branches and scratching his skin to the point of bleeding.

In-ho stares after him as the setting sun slowly fades farther and farther below the horizon, rapidly ceasing to illuminate the area with its scarlet gold, threatening to leave a nasty burn on the vampire's pale skin.

Minutes to go. He pulls a blood-stained handkerchief from his pocket, inhaling the sweet smell of another man's blood.

As the island sinks into long-awaited darkness, In-ho takes a step forward, calmly exiting the bunker, letting the door behind his back close. He stops, covering his eyes and taking a deep breath, catching a familiar scent, smirking slightly as he realizes that Gi-hun was careless enough to cut himself on one of the branches in his path. Opening his eyes, he rushes off in the right direction with a steady, measured stride.

In the minutes that have passed, he couldn't really run very far, not on this unfamiliar island. And yet, at some point, In-ho has to stop for a moment as he gets mixed signals when he sniffs his surroundings once again. He turns his head thoughtfully, gazing into the bushes nearby, and walks over to them, pushing back the leaves with his hand, suddenly stumbling

upon something that confuses him - a familiar jacket left hanging from a tree, purposely soiled in its owner's blood. In-ho narrowed his eyes slightly in interest, a noticeable smirk appearing on his face, and he removed the jacket, bringing the blood-stained spot to his face.

What an interesting man. He's playing with him - really playing. This is... something new. In-ho definitely didn't expect this from him, and the satisfaction of being fooled like that warms him from the inside out.

He leaves his jacket on the ground, turning around and heading in the right direction with a more confident and quicker stride, no longer hunting half-heartedly as before, but for real now. When he smells his prey so close again, he stops, listening to the apparent silence, when suddenly there is the sound of a branch crunching to his left. He's already taking a step in the right direction, and then realizes from the noise of the leaves - Gi-hun has darted away, realizing he's been discovered. The sweet smell of simple human fear - cause no matter what In-ho said to him, it was hard for Gi-hun to trust him completely - hits his nose, awakening his instincts, and In-ho quickens his step, catching up to the man in seconds, pouncing on him sharply, pressing his body against the trunk of another tree, causing him to let out a startled strangled sound. Fangs growing, he lets out an instinctive hiss as he opens his mouth, hand grabbing Gi-hun's hair to force him to expose his neck, tilting his head to the side. A moment more, and his fangs sink into the curve of this neck, spurting blood that promptly fills his mouth to the accompaniment of a painful stricken groan.

Gi-hun's weakened legs stop holding him up rather quickly, but In-ho holds him up with his other arm around his waist as he continues to greedily gulp down the blood, mentally counting the moments of this supper allowed to him and stopping himself at just the right time, hiding his fangs and using the tip of his tongue to lick away the remnants of blood on his shoulder and around the wound, helping it to instantly turn into a scar so that new blood doesn't continue to pour from its precious vessel.

He pulls away from his skin, pulling back slightly, looking down at Gi-hun with a hazy satisfied look, continuing to hold him from falling, realizing the man is on the verge of passing out.

“You surprised me,” In-ho says, his eyes never leaving Gi-hun's face. There's a note of genuine admiration in his voice, which should be ridiculous - a fox is not supposed to take delight in a poor frightened rabbit's pathetic attempt to deceive its cunning nature. And yet, here they are. “I'm impressed.”

Gi-hun barely keeps his eyes open, staring weakly into his face, stubborn to the last moment, unwilling to faint and yet too weak to actually answer anything.

In-ho smirks as he continues to keep him from falling, then deftly picks him up in his arms, like a bride or a prey.

“Now you should rest,” he says, effortlessly holding him in his arms as he heads towards the bunker. “Don't worry about a thing. Close your eyes now,” In-ho asks and Gi-hun can't help it as his body grows heavier after all and he relaxes, letting his head fall onto In-ho's shoulder, resting his cheek against his jacket. The vampire only smirks slightly, continuing to enjoy their little night out.

He carries him into the bedroom, laying him on the bed, and stares at him for a while, at the exposed neck that holds the mark of his bite. It would be easy to get used to this, he thinks - tonight he'd stepped on the dangerously slippery line between moderate interest, fleeting pleasure and addiction, and now he had to be careful.

It would have been much easier if Gi-hun had behaved predictably. Now things have gotten more complicated.

In-ho leaves him alone in the room, turning off the lights.

He spends the rest of the night under the white light of the moon, sitting on the shore, alone. Only as dawn approaches does he return to the bunker, listening to his assistant's report on his guest, who is still asleep at this point, gradually recovering. In-ho gives a few orders on his account, then heads to his room. He takes a shower and changes his clothes into new pants and a black shirt, leaving a couple top buttons undone. He lets his wet hair dry without his interference. Checking the time on his watch, he heads back to Gi-hun's room.

Even in the darkness, he can see his surprisingly calm expression, so peaceful, as if he is finally sleeping without any dreams. In-ho stays in the room as a silent observer, not hiding his presence, just waiting for Gi-hun to wake up after a few hours after all.

First, he flaps his eyelashes sleepily a few times. Then rubs his face with the palm of his hand, rolling over onto his back and exhaling heavily, closing his eyes again. The realization that what happened yesterday wasn't a dream doesn't seem to hit him until he hears a familiar voice.

“People always faint the first time, so you have nothing to worry about,” In-ho explains calmly, watching as Gi-hun, realizing his presence, flinches and sits up in bed, staring at him wide-eyed. “It'll be easier next time. But you should eat first,” he looks at his wristwatch. “Food should be here within a couple minutes.”

He continues to stand by the wall, a few steps away from the bed. Gi-hun looks around awkwardly, and then, noticing his reflection in the mirror in the corner of the room, freezes before standing up and moving closer, as if he still can't believe his eyes. In-ho calmly watches him turn and tilt his head slightly as he touches the bite mark with his palms, as if he could erase it from his skin like a drawing or a smudge of dirt. The vampire smirks faintly as he too stops his gaze on the scar, feeling the pleasant satisfaction of knowing he was the one who left it.

Gi-hun looks at him after all then, turning his head in his direction. His breath is still perceptible in the stillness of the room. “I...” he has to swallow to keep his voice from sounding so dry. “I thought it would... hurt, for some reason,” he remarks, and In-ho, not expecting such words, even chuckles amused, albeit almost unnoticeably.

“It only hurts the moment the skin is torn by the fangs,” he explains calmly. “But then, any pain disappears. So the prey doesn't try to fight back.”

Gi-hun doesn't find anything to say, but he doesn't need to - soon the door of the room opens and a silent young man rolls a cart inside with a full breakfast on it, the smell alone already

causing the man to turn his full attention to the food. The young man only keeps his head down as he leaves, not even saying a word, not daring to even glance at In-ho or his guest. The door closes, and Gi-hun hesitantly walks back to the bed, looking at the plates filled with various foods that were actually supposed to help him recover from blood loss - rich in protein and iron.

The man, at first feeling definitely uncomfortable under another's scrutiny, gives in, starting to eat, and In-ho, after watching from the sidelines for a while, comes over to pour juice into his glass. Gi-hun looks up at him, staring into his face until that look burns through him, as if he's afraid to actually look at him when he might get caught doing so. Never meet your gaze with a predator's.

“Your jacket,” In-ho begins calmly, placing the jug of juice back on the table. “I wonder - did you cut yourself on purpose, or did it come out accidentally and you just decided to seize the opportunity?” he asks, his gaze sliding back to the bite mark on the other man's neck.

Gi-hun chews awkwardly on his food, glancing up at him a couple times, and then answers after all. “I accidentally cut my hand, and then... decided to make the cut deeper so that there would be enough blood on my jacket,” he says honestly, and then hesitantly shows his palm, which showed the crooked line of the scar. In-ho looks at it with moderate interest, tilting his head slightly to the side, but then Gi-hun lowers his hand and his gaze again. “I don't really know why I did that...”

“You knew you couldn't win this game, and you did it anyway,” In-ho remarks calmly, stepping away from him to give him some space. “You're a fighter. I didn't see it in you then, you surprised me,” he admits calmly.

“So... it worked?” he asks, and In-ho catches himself smirking softly, stopping again at the wall.

“In a way. If it wasn't my territory, it might have bought you time. And maybe save a life, if you were lucky,” he replies, and Gi-hun, chewing his food, nods thoughtfully, not daring to look up at him again just yet. In-ho is silent for a while, and then sighs, glancing at his wristwatch. “I'll leave you here for a while. For now, you can think about whether you're going to leave or stay another night,” he says calmly and then he does leave, giving him some time to think, eat, shower, and change his clothes alone in the room.

The assistant brings him to the vampire in one of the living rooms a few hours later. In-ho, who has been waiting for him, calmly pours a glass of whiskey into one of the standing glasses on the table between the chairs. The other glass has already been filled with another, thick and red liquid, and the vampire can't help but notice how, with some degree of alarm, Gi-hun fixes his gaze on it as he walks over to his chair and sits down there, awkward and unsure, just like a guilty employee in front of his superiors. It's even strange to imagine that he was once quite brave enough to participate in a strike.

However, as In-ho managed to realize from his little stunt, the man in front of him was definitely a person of contrasts. He holds out a glass of whiskey to him calmly, and Gi-hun takes it, nodding politely in thanks before trying to lean back in his chair.

In-ho, on the other hand, takes his glass, sitting relaxedly, one hand resting on the armrest, and takes a sip of blood, keeping his gaze on the man. The man in turn doesn't look away either, though many would do so to avoid observing something so disturbing and unnatural.

In-ho curiously tilts his head slightly to the side, licking his lips, and breaks the silence first. “The money is already in your account. The bank withdrew 225 million won, clearing your debt, so you're all clean for them now. The rest of the money would also be enough to pay off the 160 million won debt to your loan sharks and continue to live peacefully, forgetting all of this. There is no serious need to continue to risk being here for another six days alone with the monster,” he remarks calmly.

Gi-hun still averts his gaze from his face, squirming uncomfortably in his chair. In-ho studies his expression, feeling honest curiosity as to what he will decide, or what he will say to justify this need to stay. “It wasn't that bad. Might as well stay here for another day.”

In-ho looks at him calmly and carefully, swigging the liquid in his glass. “You know how a boa constrictor kills its prey? It slowly wraps itself around its trusting victim, one that feels safe for a while if it's naive enough. It realizes the danger far too late, mistaking strangulation for a hug,” he tilts his head slightly to the side, keeping his gaze on Gi-hun. “You're a gambler, Seong Gi-hun. And not that stupid of a person. You must realize that being lucky today could turn out to be a serious setback tomorrow. It would be wise to take everything and leave, not to take any chances. Unless,” he traced the rim of the glass with the pad of his finger, ”you don't want to stay here for the money, but for the feeling. Risk. What else does a real gambler need?”

“Are you trying to convince me to leave?” Gi-hun asks defensively, repeating the other's movement, tilting his head to the side as well.

In-ho smiles faintly. “Not at all,” he replies. “It's not in my best interest, as you can guess,” the vampire remarks, taking a sip of blood, licking his lips again afterward.

“Then why are you saying all this? Are you trying to embarrass or scare me?” Gi-hun asks, leaning back in his chair again, still not taking another sip of alcohol.

In-ho smiles slightly, almost imperceptible in this dimly lit room. “I just want us to be honest with each other,” he says. “Here's my truth: I'm not going to drink you dry and kill you, I'll do exactly what I promised, and you'll be fine, left with a scare and a couple of scars. You can choose to trust me and take your chances. Or you can choose not to and not take the risk. That choice is entirely yours”.

Gi-hun is silent for a while, pursing his lips. “If we're not lying to each other,” he suddenly speaks again, ”can I... ask questions? About you?”

The vampire mentally chuckles at the human's reckless curiosity. Outwardly, he only nods calmly. “If you stay,” he states his term, and watches carefully as slight worry and uncertainty once more run across the man's face before he nods decisively back at him. In-ho doesn't appear satisfied with this and tilts his head slightly to the side, looking into his eyes. “Out loud.”

Gi-hun licks his lips, as if he needs to gather his thoughts again to say his final word. “I'm staying,” he says, nodding a few times again, his fingers pressing into the armrest, and then he finally takes a sip of whiskey, pleasantly burning his throat. In-ho smirks slightly, watching his every fleeting movement.

“Very well,” he says as he stands up from his seat, feeling Gi-hun escort him with a confused look. In-ho merely places the dirty empty glass on the table next to the jug of whiskey. “So I believe you have questions?” he reminds quietly as the silence drags on, and it's as if it's only at this moment that Gi-hun realizes he's staring at his back. “You can ask three now, before we head upstairs.”

“How long have you been... like this?” he asks, the awkwardness returning to his voice like he's a young boy on a first date.

In-ho pours whiskey into a dirty glass, blood mixing quickly with the alcohol. He tosses ice cubes into it. “I'm pretty young for my kind, I was turned in the eighties,” he replies, letting the man do the math.

“So you've been a vampire for... over forty years now?” Gi-hun raises his eyebrows. In-ho nods calmly, turning to face him and taking a sip of cold whiskey.

“And I was forty-two when it happened,” he answers in advance to an unasked question. “Which makes me, I suppose, in my eighties. Teenage years for a vampire. The one who turned me died after living like that for over five hundred years. Suicide,” In-ho exhales, walking relaxed closer to the man. “A couple years ago. I offered to chop off his head, but the old man really wanted to see the sun one last time, so he died painfully, on the beach,” he wrinkles his nose, stepping behind his back, deftly sliding his free hand into the dark soft hair, making Gi-hun wince. “I didn't find his body until after dark. There was nothing left of him by then but a red burn. It was like he'd been boiling in a cauldron of hell”.

“Sounds... painful,” Gi-hun answers awkwardly, and In-ho chuckles softly as she looks down at him, continuing to stroke his hair thoughtfully in anticipation of his next question. “You don't like being watched?” the sudden change of topic catches him off guard, and he stiffens, stopping moving his fingers tangled in the man's hair.

After a few moments, he continues nonetheless. “What makes you think that?” he asks calmly.

“You... escape behind my back when you get the chance. It's like you can't stay under someone else's gaze for long,” Gi-hun awkwardly remarks, falling silent again briefly. “Am I wrong?”

In-ho remains silent, looking down at him, running his fingers through his strands, then slipping a soft touch to his neck, stroking the fang scar with them. Gi-hun visibly flinches, straightening his back, his breath catching. He hears a loud gasp in the silence before still keeping his word and answering his question. “I prefer it this way. To observe, but not to be observed. It's the nature of a predator, isn't it?” he says.

A short pause. “Are you lying to me?” Gi-hun asks, a note of curiosity and understanding in his voice, as if he knows the answer and is actually asking 'why'.

In-ho smirks, covering his eyes, and his hand confidently and calmly slides from his neck to his face, covering his eyes; it makes Gi-hun chuckle nervously for some reason. In-ho, on the other hand, looks down at him with interest. “Only partly. But you've already asked more questions than I promised to answer you. Try to memorize this one so you can ask it tomorrow.”

He removes his hand, taking a volley of whiskey from his glass, staring into the resulting void inside with a slight tinge of sadness.

“I'll see you in the elevator in an hour. Don't drink more than one glass of whiskey, it can be bad for your health,” he says calmly, turning around and going to his room, sinking into a chair by his desk and covering his eyes, tilting his head back. He slips his hand into his pocket, pulling out a red handkerchief with dried blood on it, the odor is faint and yet it's still there.

He inhales deeply of the man's scent, finally opening his eyes and his gaze falls on a framed photograph lying on his desk. His wife's bright smile and dark eyes now make him feel a bitterness in his throat, as if from dead blood. He can't take the pressure, reaching out and turning the frame away from him to the wall and exhaling, clutching the red handkerchief in his palm.

It was so easy to ignore until the man himself noticed it. A shot in the dark, he was lucky enough to hit the bleeding wound. In-ho hated it when people did that - and what is even worse is the fact that only his wife had ever done that before.

He has her eyes.

It's not even the shade, not even the form - no. It's the expression. A spark of genuine naivety, stubbornness, curiosity. Every time he caught Gi-hun's eyes on him, cautious and tentative, he felt a rush of pleasure at first, relishing the attention, but as soon as the prick of realization pierced his skin, he immediately tried to run away, to disappear, to hide, just so he wouldn't feel that strange vulnerability that made him smaller, weaker - cause this would be just unacceptable for a predator. And worst of all, it was stupid. How could there be anything special about a simple look? How could the gaze of prey have any effect on the one who hunts it? It didn't make any sense, and In-ho was a man of logic. No, he needed to pull himself together, that's all. It's just this kind of month. He always misses her in the fall.

A knock on the door brings him out of his reverie, and he glances at his watch, realizing he's been sitting in one place for an hour. He fixes his hair, tucks his handkerchief back into his pocket, and exits, greeted by his assistant.

“He's waiting for you,” he reports, tilting his head respectfully before looking up into his face again, and something in his facial expression instantly lets In-ho know that something is wrong, so he waits for him to continue. “His nose is bleeding again,” the assistant blurts out, and In-ho frowns before heading first towards the correct hallway without saying anything. The young vampire follows.

Near the elevator, Gi-hun sits against the wall, holding a white handkerchief to his nose. The familiar sweet smell immediately beckons him closer, and In-ho finds himself there, squatting down beside him, calmly and confidently taking his wrist to look at how bad it is. He simply ignores his attempts to assure him that nothing serious is going on and everything is fine, holding him firmly by the chin, forcing him to tilt his head back a little.

“I'm fine.”

“A mucous membrane injury,” In-ho makes his verdict. “It's just starting to heal and you've already peeled it off again,” he sighs, straightening up.

“I'm telling you, it's nothing serious,” Gi-hun replies, rising to follow him, his back still leaning against the wall. “Don't act like the sight of my blood bothers you like that,” he snorts, reaching out for a handkerchief.

“Frequent nosebleeds can signal poor blood clotting, so yes, it does bother me like that,” In-ho calmly parries, and Gi-hun, realizing what he means, presses his lips together awkwardly, looking at him again like the beaten puppy he once saw in the back alley. In-ho sighs, turning to his assistant, only to avoid looking at it. “Don't just stand there like a junkie in front of a track of cocaine. Ask one of the staff for a favor,” he sends him away with a wave of his hand, and the assistant nods, but doesn't leave immediately, hovering for a few more moments, looking at the red track running down Gi-hun's nose to his lip. Then he does turn around, obeying his master, and walks out of the hallway toward the kitchen.

In-ho sighs, looking at Gi-hun again, reaching out and wiping the blood trail with the handkerchief himself. The man first tries to take the handkerchief, but withdraws his hand afterward, licking his lips reflexively. His own blood feels strange on his tongue, and he continues to look at In-ho. “What's the matter with him?” he asks to break the silence.

“He's young,” the vampire simply says. “I turned him recently, he hasn't learned proper restraint yet. And his unstable temper is not helping him along the way,” In-ho tucks the handkerchief carelessly into his pocket and then uses his thumb to remove the remaining red drop from his stubbled skin. “He finds it hard to contain himself when he sees live blood. Lucky for you, my orders have a stronger effect on him than his hunger. Still, I would recommend being more careful with him.”

“That time, he looked at me like... I couldn't move, couldn't even say a word,” Gi-hun remembers, watching In-ho calmly lick his blood off his finger before raising his gaze to his eyes.

“Oh, it's just his charm,” In-ho says nonchalantly calmly, and Gi-hun blinks adorably confused. “That's what he calls it. I can do that too. It's like when the snake hypnotizes the rabbit in the stories. Except for real,” he replies, and then tilts his head slightly to the side. “Would you like to try it?”

“I...” the offer clearly confuses him, but he swallows, still finding an answer. “I prefer free will, to be honest...”

In-ho smiles slightly, sliding a glance across his face to his lips. “So do I,” he says quietly, before still taking a step away from him and pressing the button to open the elevator doors and gesture for Gi-hun to come inside first.

The night is just beginning.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gi-hun was a gambler at heart, and that couldn't help but affect his behavior here and his perception of what essentially was going on. While their game might seem a bit strange, especially given the circumstances, it was still a game, and Gi-hun was a player willing to win, even if it seemed impossible at first glance, because the ending had been determined from the beginning when nature had assigned their roles. What helped, though, was the change of perspective, the concept of what could be mistaken for victory. Sure, he was doomed to be prey in the end, fangs inevitably piercing his skin at some point this night, but could that be called losing if he could impress him? Just like the first time.

It could well be considered a classic situation of capture bonding, a passive psychological response to a new master. Has been an essential survival tool for a million years: you bond with your captor, you survive; you don't, you're breakfast. He doesn't want to bore the one who holds his life in his hands. Of course, he could leave at any time, according to In-ho, but then again, he hasn't tried that yet, and it could be a trap. In any case, he didn't want to leave. And so he played along.

He's careful this time, trying not to scratch himself on the branches, not to spill a drop of his blood. Gi-hun reaches the shore, gazing mesmerized for a few moments at the few islands in the distance, at the large white moon overhead. The last rays of sunset dissolve on the horizon, and it forces him back to reality.

He thinks for a couple more moments, then steps into the water. It's quite cold, and it burns unpleasantly on his arm, but he just hisses through his teeth and endures it. He soon becomes a little afraid that he won't be able to last much longer, that there will be another predator in the water, or even just a jellyfish, and that they might not playfully sting or bite him for invading their territory. Still, he takes a deep breath and swims some distance from shore around the island to come out the other side, to confuse In-ho.

When he comes out, safe and sound, but very tired and with his clothes and hair soaking wet, he realizes that he can't just stay here for long, and so he starts walking away from the shore again towards the forest. His noisy breathing is very slow to recover, and his age and not the healthiest of lifestyles are definitely taking a toll on how hard this simple trick has been for him. His side begins to ache, and he decides to rest for a while, his back against a large boulder near the bunker. He sits down on the ground, brushing away the wet strands sticking to his forehead, thinking that he should have gotten a haircut a long time ago.

And then a familiar pain pierces his head, like a sharp flashlight beam aimed directly into the eyes of a man awake after a night of drinking. He turns away on reflex, but after a few moments he realizes what's happening, and then his heart drops to his feet, and he jumps up, as if naively confident that he can run away; in fact, he doesn't have time to even take a few steps before skillful arms wrap around his chest and another man's body presses against his back. He tries for a few more moments to break free, like a captive butterfly flapping its

wings against a jar, but then he stiffens when he feels the unexpectedly warm lips on his neck.

The gentle kiss is confusing, Gi-hun doesn't know what it is or why it's happening, but then his thoughts are cut off like by a guillotine as the fangs pierce his skin again, causing him to moan in pain before he finally relaxes, obeying the warm wave spreading through his body, tilting his head to the side, giving him more access to the pale skin.

He doesn't count how many seconds pass, but at some point his knees start to buckle, and then In-ho, as if sensing it, retracts his fangs, licking the remnants of blood from the new wound. Gi-hun feels slightly feverish and dizzy.

“That was reckless,” a soft voice cuts through the night's silence, the vampire continuing to hold him in his arms, resting his chin on the man's shoulder. “Albeit ingenious. But walking around at night in soaking wet clothes? Swimming alone in unknown waters? You could die, or get sick. I can't let you do that, can I?” he turns his head, suddenly leaving a brief kiss on his cheek before exhaling and pulling away. “Let's take you to the warmth.”

Gi-hun staggers unsupported, but In-ho takes hold of his elbow just in time, allowing him to lean on himself. In no hurry, he leads him towards the entrance of the bunker while Gi-hun barely moves his feet, dragging himself along beside him, clutching his shoulder tightly so he doesn't fall. Even in the elevator, when he could have safely leaned against the wall, he kept leaning against the vampire, but the latter didn't seem to mind as much.

The elevator doors open and In-ho continues to lead him calmly towards his rooms. Water drips onto the floor from Gi-hun. He suddenly feels cold again, as if the effects of that warming bite are finally wearing off.

When they reach his bedroom, In-ho doesn't stop, leading him into the bathroom and letting him go only there, allowing him to sit on the edge of the tub. “Undress,” he commands calmly as he turns on the water to fill the tub. A pleasant steam immediately begins to waft from the water.

Gi-hun doesn't react immediately, as if his every action and thought is severely slowed down. He turns his head smoothly, watching as the water rapidly flows from the faucet - with a rush like it has never flowed in his house. “I'm fine,” his voice comes out low, it's almost lost in the noise of the water, but In-ho certainly can't help but hear it.

“Nonsense,” he says calmly, and then finally looks at Gi-hun, into his eyes. He sighs, pursing his lips, and reaches out, touching his cheek, and the unexpected warmth of his skin surprises the man for the umpteenth time - shouldn't vampires be cold, like corpses?

“You're warm,” he doesn't exactly have a filter for words in his head right now, so the remark falls from his lips like a drop of water from his dark strand, and he sees that attentive gaze again, running over the features of his face as if searching for something.

In-ho strokes his stubbled cheek with the pads of his fingers and then stops touching him altogether. “I am. And I breathe, and I bleed. We're not that different,” he replies and begins to undo the buttons of the other man's shirt himself.

“Well... I don't grow fangs at will or drink human blood, so...” Gi-hun remarks, just letting him have it all. “I'd say that's a pretty significant difference,” he exhales noisily, closing his eyes after all while In-ho takes off his shirt, tossing it carelessly on the floor somewhere. “I... I can do it myself,” he finally reacts, as if only now realizing what's going on, and pushes him away with the weakness of a wounded animal. In-ho finds it endearing that he thinks as if he's strong enough to actually resist him, but decides to respect it, for curiosity's sake, calmly pulling away, checking the temperature of the water. Gi-hun awkwardly tucks back his wet strands, watching as the vampire wipes his hands with a white towel.

“Get undressed and get in before the water gets cold,” he commands calmly, hanging the towel back up and sliding his gaze over the man once more. “If you fall asleep in the bathtub, you'll be washing under my supervision from now on,” In-ho warns.

“If I stay here,” Gi-hun remarks, kicking off his shoes.

In-ho suppresses a chuckle. “Of course,” he allows him this illusion of control, though he knows full well that the man won't wish to go anywhere, not today, not tomorrow, not in any of the next few days. He has a combination of curiosity and excitement in him, and after what he experienced while hunted by him, he will no longer be satisfied with the usual betting on horses. Adrenaline of this kind is something he needs now almost as much as In-ho does. And it's beautiful.

Sure enough, he turned out to be right. The next day, when Gi-hun appeared in his living room after sleeping for nearly twelve hours, he certainly didn't look like a man in a hurry to go anywhere. It was hardly a matter of cold calculation and bargaining with himself for a trouble-free life with seven billion at stake, no; from the naively curious expression on his face, even a fool would realize that he was still here because he was excited by the situation itself. Like an addict who wants more, he awkwardly fixes his dark hair, coming cautiously closer, peeking over his shoulder to see what his "employer" is reading. Once he takes the last step, however, In-ho immediately slams the book shut, carelessly tucking it away on the table next to him, and turns all of his calm attention to him, giving him the opportunity to be the first to break the silence.

“Yesterday you said that you're not that different from humans,” Gi-hun begins, sitting down awkwardly on the other end of the couch, definitely still feeling a little strange in this whole setting. “And you look... like a human. Aside from the obvious”.

“Really? What gave me away?” In-ho jokes lightly, taking the glass of blood and sipping from it, never failing to look at Gi-hun with amused sparks. Every time, he wonders if he'll look away. Gi-hun doesn't. In-ho forces himself not to hide, so, to avoid thinking too much about the eyes opposite, continues with a sigh. “Vampires are for eternity preserved in the very state they were turned. That's why I'm missing one kidney, although it doesn't bother me in any way now. Blood still circulates within, keeping this body functional, warm and, more or less, alive. However, any cut I get heals almost at once. The body retains its pristine appearance, with no new scars. I still have one old one from a surgical procedure and one from a bullet wound on my shoulder,” he calmly shares. “But, no matter how many times I've been shot since then, once I take the bullet out, the wound heals itself,” he takes another sip from the glass, placing it on the table.

Gi-hun listens to him with understandable interest. “That... sounds fascinating,” he admits, and In-ho smiles faintly, almost imperceptibly.

After thinking for a moment, he pulls a folding knife out of his pants pocket and holds it out to Gi-hun, unfolding it. “Try stabbing me,” he offers calmly. “You'll see for yourself”.

“What?” Gi-hun looks at him confused, even moving a little farther away as if he were the one being threatened with the knife. “I don't... no, I can't,” he shakes his head, awkwardly avoiding even looking at the knife.

The vampire looks at him amused. “Why? You won't hurt or kill me, don't worry about that. It's just a knife,” he assures him, but Gi-hun shakes his head again.

“No, no, it's not that, I just...” he bites his lips nervously, ”I can't. I mean... even if it doesn't hurt you, I can't just stab a person with a knife,” the man says with conviction, and this is what's already heating up the interest inside In-ho. He squints slightly, tilting his head to the side as he continues to look at him carefully.

“What if I pay you? Like for a new game?” he tempts.

Gi-hun chuckles without much amusement, awkwardly fixing his hair and shaking his head. “This is the third day. I don't have that much need for money. You said so yourself, even before I agreed to continue yesterday. I'm not really here for cash,” he remarks, and In-ho studies his absolutely adorable expression thoughtfully as he continues to hold the knife in his palm.

He has no intention of backing down that easily. “But you want something, Seong Gi-hun” he says, unblinkingly looking at him like a snake hypnotizing a rabbit. “Tell me,” In-ho continues, tilting his head the other way, “for what price are you ready to stab me? How much do you value your...” his gaze slides lower on the man's face, "innocence?"

Gi-hun shakes his head. “It's not innocence. It's humanity,” he says, and In-ho is charmed by such naivety.

“Oh, trust my vast experience, Gi-hun - killing for the mere purpose of the act itself is a very characteristic trait of humanity. Other animals don't do that,” he remarks.

“No, no, humans don't... that's not what defines us,” the man shakes his head. “Humanity is different,” he presses his lips together as he looks at In-ho and then gets up from the couch to slightly increase the distance between them again like the previous days. “I'm not gonna do this just to entertain you.”

The vampire squints with interest, tilts his head, slowly circles the silhouette with his eyes, then nods slightly. He waits for a few moments, and then abruptly but calmly slashes his neck with the knife in a confident and swift motion; Gi-hun immediately opens his eyes wide in shock and, clearly not thinking about it, rushes over to him, palm over the wound, gushing red blood, crying out a panicked “no, what are you doing?! “ and only then stiffening, looming over the vampire with a calm expression looking up at him from below, as if studying a work of art in a museum.

“Fascinating," In-ho says, and Gi-hun, a little embarrassed by his reaction, slowly removes his hand from his neck, looking at it, now stained in another man's blood. Then looks at his neck, also a bit dirty, but without a single streak of scar on it. As if unable to believe what he sees, he reaches out again, fingertips touching where the monstrous cut was just a few seconds ago, spitting out dark red living blood from the warm and living body beneath him. He can feel the pulse beating beneath his touch, and it's mesmerizing. In-ho keeps his gaze on his face without saying another word.

Gi-hun tentatively removes his hand, pursing his lips, looking back into his eyes now, and he looks almost insulted as he pokes him in the chest with his finger. “You scared me, you shameless creature!” he declares, standing up and stepping away again.

“Oh, I'm sorry, I most certainly didn't mean to scare you here,” In-ho remarks ironically, standing up quietly following, taking out another handkerchief and walking over to the jug of water to lightly wet the cloth. He steps closer to Gi-hun, who presses his lips together but doesn't move away, only looking at him strangely, and In-ho carelessly wipes his neck of the traces of his blood before reaching out his hand, expecting him to do the same. Gi-hun obeys the gesture, and the vampire calmly wipes his fingers, slick with the quickly drying burgundy. “I suppose this is the time for me to ask you that important question," he remarks quietly in between, wiping the knife blade with the handkerchief at last. He looks into Gi-hun's eyes again. “Do you still want to stay?”

The man doesn't avert his gaze. The pause before answering is minimal. “I'm staying.”

In-ho smirks faintly, carelessly letting the handkerchief fall to the floor. He folds the knife with a distinctive click, not lowering his gaze for a moment. “I'm curious,” he says, ”how do you explain it to yourself?”

The pause is more noticeable this time. Gi-hun slides his gaze over his face, gathering his thoughts before giving an answer he hadn't particularly thought about before. “I am a stupid, naive, and curious adrenaline junkie with no purpose in life?”

In-ho doesn't hold back a soft chuckle, his facial features faintly brightening at those amusingly self-deprecating words, spoken so calmly and seemingly indifferently. He nods, sliding his gaze from his face lower, and then forces him to raise one hand with his palm open upwards, places the folding knife in it, gently but insistently closing the palm then, covering it with his warm hand, looking into his eyes again. “Use it when you feel the need to,” he says calmly, seeing the confusion and slight worry in the man's dark eyes, and then with a relaxed gait steps away from him, heading towards the exit of the living room. “Follow me”.

By the time they reach the surface, the sun has already gone from the horizon, and Gi-hun's eyes are still trying to adjust to the darkness for a while as he takes a few steps outside. In-ho, though he could have safely followed right behind, remains on the threshold, leaning his shoulder against the doorway and glancing around at the scenery before them.

Suddenly, Gi-hun turns to him. “How about we take a little moonlit walk?” he suggests suddenly, making In-ho blink a few times, stopping his gaze on him. Gi-hun is prompted by his silence to smile a little awkwardly. “Come on, the night lasts long enough, you'll still have

time to chase after me," he beckons him in his direction with his hand, smiling. "Well when was the last time you went out with someone here at night? And wasn't one of the conditions of my being here the need to keep you company and chat?" he reminds and stops, looking at him in anticipation.

In-ho didn't expect something like this. He also didn't expect that, after all these years, someone would randomly make him remember how much his wife adored moonlit walks, especially after they'd come back late at night from the jazz club where she sang. Those memories run across his face in a sad wistful shadow, but then he still smiles faintly, almost imperceptibly, and nods briefly, taking a step outside.

Gi-hun visibly relieved exhales and smiles, and then looks around as if choosing where they should go. As a result, they leisurely head in the direction he chooses to take them, and In-ho, hands tucked behind his back, walks along silently at first, not touching him in any way and only glancing at him occasionally.

At some point, pretty soon after, Gi-hun strikes up a new conversation, clearly driven by the fire of his curiosity. He asks him about vampires, all sorts of trivia that comes to mind, and In-ho calmly answers him, this time deciding not to put a limit on the number of questions he can ask.

"And that invisibility thing, well, that... stealth trick of yours," Gi-hun starts to ask another question, looking at him, walking beside. "Does it only work with humans, or with other animals too? You know, cats. Birds. Fish?"

In-ho catches himself not being able to immediately give a prepared answer to such an unexpected question, and, mouth ajar, hesitates for a couple moments. "I'm not sure..." he answers thoughtfully with a frown.

The man is amused by this, and chuckles. "You don't know?"

"Never really asked myself that," In-ho shrugs calmly. "But I suppose it works with all animals, including humans. It would make sense, at least - we can drink more than just human blood, after all. If we're starving and there's no other option, a doe will do for a while".

"So you can give a headache to a cat?" Gi-hun asks, and In-ho looks at him again, already opening his mouth to answer, when suddenly he doesn't hold out after all and chuckles, shaking his head and looking ahead of himself. For the first time in a long time, a real, genuine smile appears on his face, even with teeth. "What? That's a serious question!" Gi-hun says, but it's clear from his look and expression that he's indescribably pleased by this reaction, just afraid to scare it off.

In-ho doesn't look at him, preferring to focus on the moon above them. "I'm afraid so. Not that I've ever had a need for it, though, so it's all just a theory," he replies, regaining his calmer, relaxed and neutral demeanor.

Gi-hun snorts, shaking his head. "You've been a vampire for about forty years now, and you've never asked yourself that question. What have you been doing all this time?" he asks,

and In-ho shrugs.

“Mostly served my blood father. Being his right hand man, running errands of all sorts,” he replies.

“And what were you before you became a vampire?” Gi-hun asks, walking beside him along the sandy shore, when suddenly In-ho stops after a couple steps, answering only with silence to his question for a while. The man turns around at him, a little confused.

It's as if In-ho ponders for a while, looking into his eyes, how full of a story he wants to tell him, whether it's worth limiting himself to a couple dry facts. Eventually he bites his lip, raising his gaze to the white moon above them, and exhales. Lowering his gaze to his feet, he gestures for him to sit next to him, completely unconcerned about the sand getting his suit dirty. Gi-hun silently obeys, sinking down next to him with anticipation, never ceasing to stare into his face.

Finally, In-ho picks up the words to this story - the one he never seems to have told anyone yet, in all these years. Maybe because he didn't want to. Maybe because no one ever asked.

“In my youth, I worked for the police. Was a detective, investigating crimes and catching criminals, mostly murderers or gangsters. I had a father I hardly knew, a foster mom who took care of me, and a younger brother that I tried to take care of. At one point I was working undercover and was lucky enough to be able to save my future wife from death. She was a jazz singer, a very...” he chuckles weakly, looking out at the ocean in front of them, ”a very stubborn and opinionated woman. She had ideals that she lived by. An amazing personality. I was charmed at first sight. I started acting really stupid, going after work to that bar where she sang. She was stubborn, I was in love - she molded me into whatever she wanted and I never even minded. We got married. Everything was fine for the first few years, and then... she got really sick”.

He falls silent for a while, staring at the moon in the distance. Gi-hun doesn't break that silence, doesn't try to ask new questions, just looks at him thoughtfully and sadly, sympathetically.

“One day while working undercover, I met Oh Il-nam. The old man was organizing secret entertainments for rich vampires from different countries, sort of like games. A secret club for those so rich almost no one even knows about them. I'd served their feasts for years after my transformation, socialized with them... I'd never met a worse, more disgusting group of people. But they had fangs and money, and nothing else in this world really carries weight,” he says, curving his lips, and then continues nonetheless, back to where he started. “When I was human, he fancied me for something. Maybe it was the fact that I was able to infiltrate his island and learn a lot of things I wasn't supposed to without anyone noticing till it was already late. He was amused by my intelligence and my actions, so he didn't kill me, but offered to play for the amusement of those rich men. I accepted. And I won. And he asked me what reward I wanted - money, or the gift of eternal life”.

He continues to stare calmly and as if without any emotion other than thoughtfulness at the surface of the water, across which the white moonlight splashed like milk. Gi-hun pays no

attention to the scenery around him, looking only at him, as if hoping to see something special in the features of his face.

“My wife was terminally ill and yet expecting a child. She didn't want to agree to any treatment because then she would lose our unborn daughter. I tried to convince her to think for herself, but I could never change her mind about anything, and I certainly didn't have a chance that time. She didn't sing anymore, just lay at home and pretended like it wasn't excruciatingly painful for her to get out of bed in the mornings,” he says, noticing the light of distant stars in the dark canvas of the sky. His voice is steady and devoid of emotion. “If it was about the cost of treatment, I could have worked something out. Or would have been able to take the money that time Oh Il-nam offered me. But no amount of money could have convinced her to go for that treatment. So I decided to take the risk. That's why I chose eternal life as my reward”.

In-ho falls silent, feeling an unpleasant burning sensation in his throat, and bites his lip, looking only forward. He sighs, as if that will help ground him, keep the bitterness out of his own voice. Clothed in words, this story, once held only in his head, suddenly brings pain. It's as if it used to be something constant, a heaviness in his chest or a tension in his lower back that never went away, sometimes getting lighter or stronger, but now it's a fracture - sharp and painful, the kind that makes his eyes water against his will.

Despite this, he continues as if it were not breaking him at all. “Oh Il-nam turned me, and for a few days I had to stay under the care of his assistant. I drank the blood of those who lost in that game, but somehow were still alive - the remnants who weren't of interest to the VIPs. Living people who had lived below the poverty line before and had no better choice than to risk the cost of their lives. I fed on them for a few days until I felt better, and then I was allowed to go home. I was going to turn my wife, give us a second chance, save her...” he stops, staring at the sand in front of him, and swallows the lump in his throat. “When I got home, she was lying in our bed, like she was asleep. I tried to wake her up, but as soon as I touched her body, I was burned by her coldness. Her lifelessness,” his eyes are getting wet, and as soon as he blinks, a tear starts rolling down his cheek.

The memories are too vivid before his eyes, despite how long ago it was.

He sighs, as if trying to gather his thoughts. “I tried to turn her anyway, even though it was completely futile. I cut myself, tried to feed her my blood, but nothing happened. I bit her, over and over again, drank a lot of her dead blood... it wasn't the smartest decision, corpse blood is bad for vampires, we can only feed on what still has a heartbeat. Might as well drink bleach,” In-ho chuckles crookedly, shaking his head. His gaze slides from the sand to the calm surface of the water. “I ruined her body with my bites. I couldn't officially bury her anymore, so I had to bury her body myself and run to my master. My... blood father. I had to disappear and become his assistant on the island. Leading and organizing his blood games, until the day he died. And afterward, too”.

For a while, the shore sinks into silence. In-ho feels Gi-hun's gaze on him, and both hates him and doesn't want him to stop looking at him at the same time, as if he were naked under his gaze with a soul he no longer has. One pathetic tear, almost invisible in the darkness of the night - is that really a reason to feel shame? And yet In-ho feels it, and so he presses his lips

together before turning sharply in his direction and making him fall down on the sand beside them, like a predator leaping out of its chunks and attacking its prey.

Gi-hun startles naturally, making a weak attempt to break free as the back of his head hits the sand, small grit tangling in his hair, but it's all to no avail. In-ho holds him tightly, resting one hand on his chest, and looks exactly into his eyes, almost ready to taste him, but stops when he sees the reflection of the moonlight in his dark eyes. He freezes until he suddenly hears the distinctive click of a folding knife, and that's when he raises his eyebrows slightly, tilting his head at a slight angle, looking curiously into Gi-hun's face before lowering his gaze and seeing the knife in his hand.

In-ho smirks, looking into his eyes again, waiting with excitement for the man to finally hit him, for him to dare this useless but beautiful move - and suddenly he manages to surprise him again, doing something he completely didn't expect. The smell of freshly spilled blood hits his nose, but before he even realizes what's happened, Gi-hun covers his mouth with his bloody palm, and sweet drops stain his lips, slipping inside, making the predator within him nestle contentedly into the hand that's been feeding him. Then again, just after a few moments, Gi-hun suddenly manages to slip out from under him, leaving him confused, taken by the effect of surprise, sitting on the sand near the cobblestones while the man runs away. Red droplets fall from his hand, leading in his direction like breadcrumbs on the sand, and In-ho would have no problem catching up to him in a few seconds by now without even letting him run into the forest, but he continues to sit still, staring after him, his mouth stained with blood.

A chuckle escapes his lips, and they curve into a wide, fanged grin, and then he bursts out laughing, throwing his head back and falling to the sand as if he'd heard the best joke or seen the most hilarious comedy act. The heaviness in his chest is replaced for a few moments by an unaccustomed, startling lightness. He feels... human again. And it's ridiculous.

He looks up at the moon above his head, a mysterious white silhouette floating across the sky, and he's in no hurry to get anywhere.

After all, the night has just begun.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so glad to see that you like this fic, it really warms my heart <3

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In-ho sits in a black leather chair in front of a dark screen, thoughtfully sipping the red liquid from his glass, thinking about the upcoming games he has bound himself to host every year. Soon enough, he would be watching them from this screen, preparing everything for the arrival of the VIPs, wearing a mask, not to hide his identity but to avoid showing them his emotions and loathing for their personalities. But for now, he's alone here. A woman's voice hums a familiar song from the music player, and he is silently listening to the lines when the click of a door opening sounds behind him just a few meters away.

He doesn't turn around, he doesn't need to, knowing that it's Gi-hun, who was brought here as soon as he was done with his breakfast. He would be able to recognize his scent even blindfolded in a room full of people, and it was a thought that makes him bite down lightly on his lower lip, silently berating himself in his head.

Calm footsteps approach him down the rather long hallway until they stop behind his back. For a couple moments he waits for Gi-hun to dare to touch him the way In-ho has touched him so many times before, but it doesn't happen and the man only walks around the chair, keeping his hands in his pockets as he comes over to the music player. The vampire stares at him calmly, not saying a word as Gi-hun studies the music player, colored in gold and red, with figures moving slightly. His costume from yesterday had expectedly been sent to the wash, and he was now in a dark green three-piece. His hair fell down to his eyes in a slight wave, and he tucks it back with another sweep of his hand before turning to face In-ho, his expression as awkward and almost calm as ever. There are three scars coloring his neck, six red dots that almost look like freckles or small pigment spots. The thought that they are all left by him pleasantly warms something dark in the man's chest.

“I'm staying,” Gi-hun answers an unasked question, the music continues to play in the background. He doesn't move any closer; In-ho doesn't get up from his chair.

The vampire nods quietly, dropping his gaze from the man's face for a few moments, sliding it over his body, noting the absence of his tie and the undone buttons of the white shirt that so temptingly exposes his neck and the hollow between his collarbones. Finally, he lifts his left hand from the armrest, inviting him closer with a slight, unobtrusive gesture, and Gi-hun, after only a moment's hesitation, approaches without asking questions. When he's only half a step away from him, In-ho takes his hand in a sliding motion, opening it palm up to look at the scar the man had willingly inflicted on himself yesterday for a small distraction.

With the tip of his finger, he traces the outline of the red scar treated back in the night by his doctor. “You show an amazingly consistent tendency of using self-harm for the mere sake of my admiration,” he remarks calmly, pressing a little harder on the center of the scar, causing the man to wince.

When he raises his gaze to his face, he notices the soft red hue of the man's cheeks in that semi-darkness and an unsure attempt to pick a response. “I don't...”

In-ho doesn't let him lie, quietly closing the subject by placing the folding knife in his open palm and closing it with a gentle but confident pressure, continuing to hold Gi-hun's hand in his for a while longer. “It's a gift. Don't lose it again,” he says, and then releases his palm after all, looking into his eyes again. Even looking down at the vampire, Gi-hun definitely doesn't feel more confident in his position here, and licks his lips awkwardly before nodding and tucking the knife into the pocket of his dark green pants.

He hesitated to step back, but he didn't dare to do anything else either, as if waiting for a further command. After all, there wasn't even a second chair here - just the one In-ho was sitting quietly in right now. The only place Gi-hun could potentially consider for himself right now where he would look organic was on the floor at another man's feet, but even the thought of that made his cheeks burn. Still, without the slightest hint of alternative idea, he decides to do so, lowering his gaze before lowering himself to the floor himself.

In-ho slowly tilts his head to the side with lazy curiosity, keeping his gaze on him as Gi-hun positions himself on the floor between his spread legs. Somehow he thought the man would prefer to stand, or walk awkwardly and nervously around the room, or maybe end up sitting on an armrest, but he manages to surprise him again. He doesn't show it with a look or a smile, only calmly watching him, the way he licks his lips awkwardly and nervously before raising his gaze. His hand rests on In-ho's knee, his other hand on top of that palm, as if it's a necessary support for him. It makes In-ho wonder, his thoughts drifting off to the wrong place.

“That thing you mentioned yesterday,” the awkward and soft voice cuts off his dark thoughts, making him blink and tilt his head, tensing slightly. “About the games,” Gi-hun clarifies and In-ho presses his lips together, once again berating himself for how much he's said under the influence of this moon and other man's proximity. “What's up with them?”

In-ho tries a chuckle, lowering his gaze and smiling, taking a sip of blood from his glass. “A gambler asks about games, who would've thought?” he says, shifting his gaze to him again, setting his empty glass on the table next to him. His fingers tap to the rhythm of the tune in the background. “Ask me something else,” he indefinitely waves the question away with the palm of his hand, squirming at the mere idea of giving an answer.

Gi-hun looks at him intently. His gaze feels like a splinter too deep under his skin, but In-ho only licks his lips from the remnants of his bloody drink, enduring the stare.

The man sighs, even sitting between his spread legs managing to look in a way that makes In-ho once again wonder if there's some mysterious ancient power hidden within him that affects him like this. “People die playing them, right? For a chance to make money - or to become like... you?” he doesn't drop the subject, and that audacity makes the vampire laugh briefly, shaking his head, looking away.

He stares into his eyes for a couple moments before answering with more weight in his voice. “You want to change the subject,” he says, softly but firmly, and Gi-hun purses his lips, continuing this lingering eye contact. It lasts for a long time, but In-ho braces himself, not

averting his gaze, no matter how much he wants to hide from those painfully familiar eyes right now, with the same stubborn expression he saw so often over forty years ago. If he still had the ability to sleep, he would continue to see those eyes in his dreams, but eternal life had mercifully deprived him of that curse. And yet, it gave him this.

Gi-hun thinks about it for a while, his expression more pensive and sad than ever before. “Okay,” he decides, nodding and lowering his gaze, but even from the tone of his voice In-ho realizes that what follows will please him even less than this topic of conversation - a painful prick of deja vu passes over him like a razor cutting too deeply across his cheek. After only a slight hesitation, Gi-hun gets up from the floor, squeezing his knee one last time with his fingers.

He's about to go behind his back, but In-ho grabs his wrist with a sigh, not letting him slip away, not wanting him to disappear from his sight so quickly, and the man stops.

“You need to rest tonight. Letting me drink your blood so often can be extremely bad for your well-being,” he says, not letting him go, but not looking in his direction either.

Gi-hun looks at him confused, not trying to move away. “So we'll settle for just a moonlit stroll tonight, then?” he asks with a weak chuckle, and In-ho still looks up at him. Beneath his fingers, his pulse is pounding.

A brief pause hangs between them, In-ho looking at the area around his neck before returning to his eyes. “I'm going to be quite busy today, I fear,” he says gently, the pads of his fingers gliding over the warm skin as if in a soothing way - a barely perceptible tenderness, on the verge of being weird, but still permissible. “There's a lot of work to be done that I can't afford to delegate to anyone yet, unfortunately...” In-ho sighs, still letting go of the man's hand - he clenches the freed palm into a fist and, licking his lips, looks toward the empty glass again, red streaks frozen on its walls.

“Let me guess - these games?” Gi-hun asks, and In-ho sighs heavily, not believing that this is really happening - or that he's letting it happen, even though he could, only if he wanted to, just make Gi-hun stop.

Instead, he picks up the carafe of blood and pours some into his glass. “How about we talk about this another time? I'll see you in the morning, and in the meantime,” he sets the carafe down and takes the glass, still not turning to look at the man, ”my assistant will keep you company so you don't get bored. How does that sound?”

“Your assistant? How about 'oh it sounds awful, thank you for asking'? I don't need a babysitter,” Gi-hun sounds almost insulted, clearly not realizing that In-ho has just cleverly shifted the topic from unpleasant to more neutral.

“He does,” he remarks nonchalantly, sending the necessary command through his smart watch.

“You're kidding,” Gi-hun declares, and In-ho looks up at him unfazed as the door behind them opens. The man looks over and sees a familiar young man with a smile heading towards them.

“I'm not,” In-ho replies, calmly accepting a tablet with open files on all the potential participants from his assistant's hands. “Don't worry, he won't hurt you. He knows I'll kill him if something happens to you,” he says calmly.

Gi-hun looks skeptically at the smiling young man, but then looks at In-ho again. “See, I'd find it nice if it was a joke, but it's not, so it's just terrifying”.

In-ho allows an almost imperceptible smile to flicker fleetingly at the corner of his mouth, then sets the tablet aside on the table to the carafe with a sigh and looks at his assistant. “Keep him company. I spot a new bruise or scar on him, you'll be sunbathing tied to a tree. Practice your self-control. We don't want another repeat of that incident in the park, do we?”

“You're the one who told me to have fun and loosen up a bit,” the young man says as if in his defense.

“And where exactly did you hear in this an inducement to drink a few homeless people because they picked the wrong gift?” In-ho asks calmly. Gi-hun flinches uncomfortably, quickly shifting his gaze from him to the young vampire. The latter smiles awkwardly, meeting his gaze:

“Oops.”

“Why can't I just go for a walk before it gets dark?” Gi-hun looks at In-ho again.

The young vampire gives a short laugh. “Come on, we had a pretty good time together on the subway, didn't we? Let's go, this will be fun,” he beckons with a nod, heading back towards the exit.

Gi-hun looks at In-ho as if expecting him to change his mind, but In-ho calmly endures the look, pretending as if he doesn't understand why the man feels more unsettled and uncomfortable around his assistant than he does around someone who has already drunk his blood several times. Gi-hun sighs heavily then, shaking his head, and still heads off to follow the young man.

When he's almost at the door that the assistant holds open for him, In-ho suddenly remembers something, so his voice breaks the silence again. “And no Russian roulette this time,” he turns his head slightly, sounding firm and serious, as if it was something that needed to be reminded of.

The young vampire rolls his eyes, tilting his head back slightly, banging it against the door behind him. “You're no fun,” he says, but then calmly steps out, patting Gi-hun on the shoulder, making him wince and recoil farther away. “He's just being dramatic. We could have some fun! How about ddakji?”

Gi-hun walks further down the corridor without much enthusiasm, still somewhat dissatisfied with this kind of development. “Didn't your boss just threaten to kill you if I get a new bruise on me?”

“We're not gambling on slaps or money,” the young man chuckles. “That wouldn't be fun anymore. We need to up the ante!”

Gi-hun sighs, but then chews his lip and stops at the next door, turning to face him. “Okay,” he says. “But if I win, you'll tell me about these games you're running here.”

The fleeting surprise is just as quickly replaced by laughter. The vampire covers his lips with the palm of his hand, shaking his head disbelievingly. “Oh damn,” he says, grinning again, and tucks both hands into his pockets. “No, that's... that's not going to happen. It's too early for me to die, especially so painfully. The boss wants to keep you in the dark, for your own good, so... just relax and enjoy yourself, Bluebeard's wife. We don't want the key to his awful truth stained in blood, do we?” he asks with a smile before walking past him into the living room, continuing to hold the door open for him until Gi-hun, frowning, follows after all.

The man heads towards his room and the young vampire follows, however the door closes loudly in his face. Chuckling, he thinks about it for a couple moments and then shrugs, turning his back to the door and sitting down in the chair next to it. From his pocket, he pulls out his phone, yawning boredly.

In-ho turns off the music player, diving thoughtfully into the files of potential participants, studying the brief dossier with all the information. An unpleasant longing continues to habitually tug at his chest, but he ignores it, distracting from work only for a sip of blood. Finished with that, he heads down the corridors to the correct part of the bunker, hiding his face behind the mask as if behind an invisible barrier, removing which he removes all responsibility from his back as well. The rest of the evening is spent in preparation, which tires him monstrously, but more than anything else it's the calls and conversations with guests. Though they shared a common thirst, there was little in common between them, and the differences seemed a chasm of civility. In-ho sometimes felt much closer to the desperate gamblers than to the greedy rich men in masks. It seemed like a greater curse than what kept him from seeing the sun anymore. He was never a man of the day anyway.

Weary, he leaves his mask on the table, runs a hand through his hair, sighs. In-ho takes a shot glass filled with fresh blood and drinks it all in one gulp, setting it back on the tray with a clatter. Sitting in his chair, he feels restless, on edge, and his hand is already reaching to turn on the music player, but he stops himself. He taps an unfamiliar rhythm with his fingers on the armrest of the chair, his gaze running from one thought to another, until he finally makes a decision and rises decisively from his seat, relieving himself of his tie and jacket, leaving those here, and heads for the familiar door.

He frowns faintly when he sees his assistant tossing a coin in boredom. The young man, sensing his master's approach, raises his head and immediately straightens up, deftly catching the coin and letting it disappear in his palm. “He preferred to rest in his room. Hasn't left it all this time,” he reports, and In-ho gestures him away phlegmatically. The assistant immediately nods and obeys him, walking confidently out of the room.

The vampire's hand freezes centimeters away from the doorknob as he stops himself, deciding instead to tap on the door with his knuckles, listening to what's going on in the room. After a few moments of seemingly hesitant silence, he hears a soft “come in.”

In-ho opens the door, staying in the doorway for a few moments, but then enters, letting it close behind him with a soft click. Gi-hun sits at the foot of his bed, the folding knife in his hands looking like a toy. His white shirt is wrinkled, and his green jacket and vest lie in a careless pile on the chair. He's spent hours in this room out of sheer stubbornness, without even killing that time with sleep and, judging by the cart of already-cooled dinner, without even eating.

In-ho sighs, not showing his emotions in any other way, and walks quietly closer to examine all the cold dishes and finally stops his attention on something that could be eaten cold and with no apparent sense of hunger in the man. Taking the pomegranate, he tears it into two pieces without any difficulty and holds one part out to Gi-hun, waiting for him to accept it.

“The pomegranate helps you recover from blood loss,” he remarks in a low voice. “As does all the other food here. Don't make me feed you against your will,” In-ho looks at him expectantly and Gi-hun, sighing and looking away, takes the pomegranate nevertheless, leaving the knife on the floor nearby. He ineptly breaks the pomegranate into even smaller halves before taking a handful of red grains and throwing them into his mouth. His fingers quickly get dirty with the red juice.

In-ho puts the rest of the fruit back on the plate with the grapes and apples before sitting down on the edge of the bed after thinking for a moment. His palm soon finds its place in the other man's hair, as if stroking those strands is his new way of dealing with the noise of thoughts and emotions deep within his dark soul.

Gi-hun breaks off a few more grains from the pomegranate before noticing his soiled hand, and his gaze lingers on the dark maroon beneath his fingernails.

“The way you were talking last night about those bloody games,” Gi-hun begins, his voice soft and thoughtful. “You don't like all that stuff. But you're doing it anyway. Why? Is there someone making you do it?”

“I asked you not to ask me about the games...” In-ho starts with a sigh, but Gi-hun interrupts him:

“I'm not asking about games, I'm asking about you,” he says, turning his head slightly to look up at him.

In-ho stares back at him thoughtfully, his hand frozen in his hair.

He remains silent for a while, trying to find the right words for his response, deciding to make this peculiar compromise. After all, it was his own fault for mentioning it all in an attempt to soothe his soul, to cover his own bleeding wounds with the palms of another's hands. He had been aware of Gi-hun's curiosity; he could have guessed that he would have latched on to the secret and tried to make sense of it, like a kitten tangled in the threads of a ball of wool.

He looks away, resuming the thoughtful movements of his fingers in his dark hair. “While Oh Il-nam was alive, I had no other choice. I couldn't disobey him physically, he was my father, the one who turned me. It's... a very strong bond, and it definitely can't be described as one

that favors equality. His orders had a special effect on me. I was a puppet in his hands, and all I had to do was keep a straight face and pretend that I'd chosen this all on my own, because knowing that I was this weak for somebody else was the most disgusting feeling of all. Those threads only got severed after Oh Il-nam died, just a couple years ago".

He feels Gi-hun's gaze on him, attentive and wary, but he doesn't look back at him and tries not to close himself off from him. It's harder than he thought it would be.

"I once thought that when this happened, I'd finally be free, do what I wanted. Destroy the games and run away somewhere, try to start over in a new place," In-ho continues, a faint cheerless smile fleetingly slipping across his pensive features. "But that night, when I became free of my father, I realized that those hopes were hollow. If I just stopped running the games, someone else would take that spot and I'd be hunted for betrayal. If I don't just close the place down, but kill the clients, I'm doomed to die with them, and it will still be useless because Oh Il-nam has already shown them that they can have fun that way. He formalized that demand into a concrete idea and gave them a proposition. Now it's taking place not only in Korea, but in other parts of the world as well. My teenage rebellion would have done no more damage to that system than a paper cut to a finger".

He removes his hand from Gi-hun's hair, but looks at him again, tilting his head slightly thoughtfully. In-ho expects his reaction, his answer, but a part of his soul already suffers the pain of seeing the same naive light and stubborn belief in the nonexistent and impossible victory of the good.

So perhaps that's why his words to the vampire don't surprise him as much as they otherwise could. When you get used to unpredictability, predictability starts to seem more surprising. "If you can't save the world, it makes sense to at least save yourself. It sickens you that you're doing it. Why not give that burden to someone else?"

"It's not that clear-cut," In-ho replies calmly, getting up from the bed, not looking at Gi-hun again. "When I'm in this system, I can at least partially control it. I can remain confident in its relative fairness. All players are equal, all given the same chance. And I may have to put up with those insufferable rich people, but sometimes the winner picks the money, gets out of debt and starts life with a clean slate. Sometimes that winner even turns out to be the best of them when I'm lucky. Someone with a pile of unpaid medical bills or someone who went all in not for themselves, but for someone they love. Sometimes they get to do things that I failed to".

"And the other 455 people?" Gi-hun asks, and In-ho feels his gaze on him as he pours himself a glass of water. "They die, and their families are left penniless, desperate, with no idea what became of those they cared about".

"You exaggerate the scale of the tragedy. For many, the disappearance of a man who dragged an entire family into dangerous debt for betting or drugs was more of a blessing than a curse," the vampire calmly remarks. "Most of those people don't deserve to be saved. I watch them every year, and every year it all turns out to be nothing more than... mere disappointment. There are rarely any diamonds in the coal dust that are worth taking a peek at. Humans..." he shakes his head, looking into his glass of water, "are a disappointment".

“Eighty years of living among humans and you still haven't figured out what humanity means?” Gi-hun asks with a chuckle, and In-ho turns his head finally in his direction, waiting with silent wonder for his attempt at an explanation. A naive child, thinking as if he knows something an adult doesn't. Such confidence in his eyes, such a slight smile on his face, as if he was actually amused to discover that someone he thought was a wise adult didn't actually know something completely obvious.

His wife had once looked at him the same way when she found out that he didn't understand the point of music and dancing. And he felt just as skeptical then, and yet she still managed to change his mind, easily and with just a few words; there's a hope splashing inside, like a drowning animal, that Gi-hun can do it too. He lets him speak his mind.

“Look, it's not like I never feel disappointed in people, in humanity. Hell, most of my life I feel disappointed in myself!" he chuckles, shaking his head. “I've made so many mistakes in my life and learned almost nothing, keep falling into the same pits because of something as ridiculous as addiction. I've lost my job, I've been a disappointment to my mother, stealing from her to make a new bet so I could feel alive for at least a couple minutes. And I know I'm not the only one like this. I know that people do worse things, all the time, every day, even right now, in this moment. They fight, they rob, they kill, they say shit that makes other people want to crawl into a noose. And neither money nor poverty is the cure for that kind of life. Mankind disappoints me every day I hear any of the news, from anywhere in this world. But you know what? That's not what it means to be human. It's just a backdrop against which the rays of humanity become easier to see, if only you choose to look closely”.

He stares at him for a couple moments, continuing to smile slightly with that goofy smile of his, and then rises from the floor, his hands still red from the pomegranate and staining the edge of the sheet as he leans on the bed. In-ho continues to stare at him as if emotionless, waiting for him to come to his point that he started this whole speech for.

“Humanity is in the little things,” Gi-hun explains. “When a man has nothing to eat and he shares his first piece of bread after many days of hunger with another. When a child is left without parents and neighbors try to take care of him because they know he has no one else. When you give a freezing girl your jacket to keep her from getting sick while she waits for her worried parents to come get her. You can't judge humanity by their mistakes even if they repeat them again and again,” Gi-hun smiles weakly while looking at him. In-ho continues to hold the glass of water and look at him calmly in return. “Humanity is in the music and in the dancing, in the holidays, even in the silliest ones,” he says and In-ho still averts his gaze as he takes a sip, forcing his hand not to shake. Gi-hun sighs, shaking his head and taking a step towards him. “Humanity is silly, ridiculous, naive. And you know it yourself. Don't you remember?” he tilts his head, waiting for In-ho to look at him, but it doesn't happen. “If you keep looking at people only at their worst moments, making them fight each other to the last survivor for the prize, I guess you can really forget that even someone who kills and deceives others to take their money and get out of here alive is actually human outside the walls of this place. One can forget that they can love someone and be better for that person. That they can laugh not only at someone, but at their kid's joke. That somewhere in there, inside, they can be good. Or want to be”.

In-ho is silent, staring at the bottom of the empty glass. Thoughts one after another fill the attic of his mind until it's so crowded it's suffocating.

Gi-hun sighs, still looking at him with that naive and hopeful look that makes him want to hide from. “You said we weren't so different. That you breathe, that you bleed. I've seen you laugh and I've seen tears on your face. Whether you realize it or not, you're still human in a way that matters,” he says with conviction and suddenly reaches out, boldly wrapping his fingers around his chin to force him to look up, and it's so rude and impulsive that In-ho doesn't even put him in his place, as he would put anyone else if they dared to do something like that. The dark eyes now stare into his tired ones. They are trying to read something in his face. “You don't need to keep being a bad person just because you haven't been a good one for a long time”.

In-ho gazes into his face, those eyes of a doe caught in a trap set on a wolf.

He takes his hand gently, pulling it away from his face but continuing to hold it, squeezing his fingers a little tentatively over the rough skin that's coarsened from a long, hard life.

He licks his lips, trying to convey a warning with his intonation, quiet but confident. “You don't understand what you're asking me to do, Gi-hun,” his gaze is calm, but there's a noticeable heaviness in his features and the strain of sadness on his shoulders as he lowers his hand.

Gi-hun chuckles, though notes of the desperation of an arguing gambler can still be heard in the tone of his voice. “Well then explain it to me!”

Explain it to him? Explain it to him, so that that fire in his eyes turns into the same smoke that overwhelms his own lungs? So that when he tasted a sip of wine he would always think of red and viscous dead blood on his tongue, so that he would stop seeing the good in the people around him like he does now, so that he would see the real monsters, the ones that not even a moment of humanity could fix? Show him all this and lose that look again when he could instead continue to watch him from the sidelines, furtively, lurking as a blurry silhouette on the periphery of his vision? Explain to him that fighting was futile and would lead to nothing but endless loss? Explain to him that playing the hero would result in nothing but misery? Explain that the creatures of the night are doomed to drown the remnants of all that is good in themselves because any goodness reminds them of the sun? *No.* No, he wouldn't do that to himself.

He shouldn't have told him anything about himself yesterday, shouldn't have let him glimpse in the doorway behind him, shouldn't have shown him the humanity in his face. No, he should have remained what he was in his eyes - a predator. *And how could the wolf let his nose rub against the hand that was held out for him to take a bite?*

Gi-hun looks at him as if waiting for a response, but In-ho just presses his lips together and does something he's been trying not to do for the past few days, ever since Gi-hun figured out his little habit - closes himself off from his gaze, making him turn away from his face abruptly, as if from an impossibly bright sun - or as if from something unbearably disgusting.

“Argh, come on, don't do that, just talk to me!” Gi-hun sounds almost insulted, trying to look at him even as the pain makes moisture appear in the corners of his eyes.

“You should rest, Gi-hun,” In-ho says softly and evenly before turning around and heading for the door.

“No, don't you dare leave me like this!” Gi-hun says, and the vampire's hand is already resting on the door's handle, as if he's forcing himself not to hear those words, as suddenly - In-ho stiffens like he's been slapped.

The familiar smell hits his nose, and his defenses instantly drop as he turns to look at Gi-hun.

He took the folding knife and slashed his lip - sharply, awkwardly, desperately, just to get his attention, just so he wouldn't leave. Blood runs down his chin, he breathes heavily in that impossible silence, and In-ho looks at him shocked for the first few moments, not believing the man seriously just did that. Cut his lips in the presence of a vampire! And for what? In-ho wants to laugh. How freely and confidently he lets this man feel in his dark presence! If it were anyone else in his place, Gi-hun would have been lying exsanguinated in the ground long ago.

In-ho looks away again, his hand still on the doorknob. He remains silent for a few moments, showing no emotion, hearing only Gi-hun's breathing, and then he chuckles faintly, as if impressed, and shakes his head, as he always does when he sees a man doing something extraordinary and unreasonable.

The fangs have already grown in his mouth, and he runs his tongue over one of them, feeling how much he's become addicted to that sweet taste, already realizing that he can't deny himself the pleasure - definitely not after the sight that has opened before his eyes.

He closes the door, taking his hand off the handle, and looks at Gi-hun again, turning to face him.

It should hurt, but at the sight of a predator, prey usually forgets about pain, even if it has a broken paw. The cut is a little too deep, the blood mixing with the little drops of pomegranate juice that have already turned pink at the corners of his mouth. Scarlet runs down his chin and drips onto the carpet beneath the man's feet. This priceless scarlet, so desirable to him! In-ho can't let such precious drops fade into oblivion when they belong on his tongue.

He finds it astonishing how easily Gi-hun manages to manipulate him.

In-ho lets the air out of his lungs, in a few quick and decisive steps reducing what remains of the ridiculous distance between them, his hands immediately finding their place in the man's hair, and collides his lips with his own. Blood fills his mouth in small droplets, and he runs his tongue skillfully over the wound so that it, like the holes from his fangs, heals more quickly and stops bleeding, and then penetrates his mouth with it, feeling Gi-hun lose himself for a few moments under his pressure, as if he'd expected something else when he told his vampire where to put his greedy, predatory mouth - but then he responds after all, relaxing and melting like jelly in the sun.

An unrestrained moan echoes through the room as In-ho sucks on his lower lip again, leaving not a single tasty drop of blood there, then licks the trail of red on his chin with a deft flick of his tongue and kisses his way down to the neck that's so trustingly exposed for him. Gi-hun clings to his shoulders as if afraid of falling, but moments after In-ho pushes him off and onto the bed. The man rests his elbows on the mattress, looking up at the vampire, who soon enough covers his lips with his own again, kissing him greedily as if making a statement. His broad palms stroke through the fabric of his shirt before abruptly clutching it with his fingers and tearing it, not caring about the expensive fabric or the buttons flying off to the sides. Warm lips move lower down his chin to his neck, and Gi-hun thinks he's about to feel the familiar pain of fangs piercing his skin, but instead the hot kisses make him warm under the sure touch, and he suddenly finds the strength to bury his fingers in the man's dark hair as he usually did with him. For a small infinity, he does forget that he had tried to talk to him about something before this fire, into which he had thrown the first match himself with a single cut.

He's pretty sure there will be bruises on his body. Short-lived marks on his skin from the force with which In-ho squeezes his thighs as he leaves him unclothed beneath him, heated and hungry for something more. In-ho scratches at him with his fangs without piercing his skin, and - *god, god, god* - he ***smiles*** when he feels Gi-hun flinch from it. He looks up at the vampire from below, at that smile, and it's as if everything inside him is swirling in an endless maelstrom, and he pulls him close as if he can taste that smirk.

He kisses it, and collides his tongue with those fangs, once again unhidden, and catches himself as a startled moan comes from his mouth.

In-ho pulls away from his lips, looking into his face with eyes clouded with desire, moving her fingers inside him. “Oh those sounds you make sometimes...” he says no louder than a whisper, and under his gaze, Gi-hun feels like a wounded animal being comforted by its owner. He'd never thought before that something like this could cause his body to react this way - and yet, here he is. The word “enjoy” would be a severe understatement for what he feels now.

Not that he had much experience with it. Especially in the last few years, when Sang-woo had disappeared from his life again, seemingly away on a business trip somewhere out in the west. And maybe that was partly why he was now so sensitive, pliable, a little awkward in his attempts to respond in some way to this skillful caress. Despite his feeble attempts, all he manages to utter is the utterly sincere and meaningless, “you're so beautiful,” because no other thoughts are left in his head at the moment.

In-ho chuckles, and it does something to him to be the reason for that smile. It's as if he's made it his goal to see it on the vampire's face as often as possible these past few days, and so far he's succeeded. The elation of his new victory is lost amongst the other feelings as sweet pleasure seems to run through his body like an electric current, and he moans again, squinting, tilting his head back slightly, not even thinking about the fact that he's showing his neck so trustingly to the carnivore. His lips cover the old scars almost in the same second, and he burrows into the hair at the back of his neck, squeezing it between his fingers, not wanting him to stop, to pull away even for a moment.

Once he's inside, for the first few moments Gi-hun feels almost something akin to panic - his heart beats loudly, he can hear his own breathing in the silence of the room, and his head spins when In-ho runs his tongue around the familiar points on his skin, exhaling almost in his ear.

“Do you know why you're so scared right now?” comes a whisper that makes goosebumps run all over his body. In-ho leaves a kiss on the curve of his jaw instead of a punctuation mark, and Gi-hun feels on edge from that simple touch. “A rabbit must feel something similar when a snake gradually squeezes it in its embrace,” a new kiss falls on his Adam's apple, and Gi-hun flinches as he feels the first few leisurely, deep frictions inside. A new moan falls from his lips, and the pace gradually builds, becoming so perfect that everything that's happening starts to feel more and more like a magical dream.

In-ho's breath is almost scalding, and it's as if it's a special gift of nature to trick him into forgetting who he's exposing his precious neck for. Gi-hun doesn't want to forget that.

“Bite me,” he exhales, his voice both quiet and deafening, and In-ho freezes for a few moments. “Please,” like a second bullet to his chest, and the vampire stares into the curve of his neck, his back rising and falling with his breathing as droplets of sweat trickle down his spine, passing over the very quickly disappearing marks from the other man's scratches.

He hesitates, just a few lingering moments, but then Gi-hun feels In-ho's tongue lavishly tracing along his neck, as if mapping out a place for a new mark, and a palm damp with lube circles his cock, stroking slowly up and down a few times. His heart quickens, a new quiet sound escapes his lips, and suddenly a familiar pain strikes his body, causing him to sob pitifully, tears flowing uncontrollably down his cheeks, and a few moments later he feels a pleasant, all-consuming warmth as the blood begins to drain from him. All of a sudden the pleasure becomes too much, with the movements inside and on his cock, with that dizzying heat, and it explodes, white drops staining his palm, his own and another man's chest, and he palpably weakens, as if losing all his life energy at once. He falls into sleep faster than he has time to realize that In-ho has caught up with him with a few movements inside, licking the blood from his precious neck.

Chapter End Notes

gi-hun has no survival instincts and this turns in-ho on i fear. oh well. can't blame him tbh

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In-ho cleans up the mess they left behind by himself once he makes sure Gi-hun is breathing calmly and his heart is beating the same way it was before. In the quiet of the night, he gathers up their clothes, tossing them in the laundry basket in the bathroom, then soaks the tip of a towel in warm water to wipe the white marks off his lover's body. He takes a shower, and, when he returns, sits on the bed next to the still sleeping man, reaching out and touching his face, admiring it while thoughts and worries eat away at him from the inside, trying to break through the locked door he holds back with his last strength. His warm fingers burrow into Gi-hun's dark hair and he strokes his head, settling down next to him, leaving a kiss on his temple.

He doesn't leave until a couple hours later, covering him with a blanket and getting dressed before he does. In-ho tries to get back to his duties, supervising the preparations for the upcoming games that were just days away, but his thoughts keep drifting off in the wrong direction. At first it's just the pleasant memories of the night they spent together - it's been a long time since he's felt this way, since he's allowed himself to feel this way. But then scarlet splashes are added to them, shards of all the words Gi-hun said to him before.

In-ho bites his lip now, realizing just how much this is all affecting him, and that he can't let something like this happen. After all, how old is Gi-hun? He's a human being. He's going to die soon, and In-ho won't turn him, he just can't do that to this man. This all makes him tremble, and he looks at his shaking hand as if it's a disobeying soldier he's ready to shoot in cold blood. Instead, he only sighs heavily and clenches his hand into a fist.

By evening, he manages to convince himself that he is in control. He makes a deal with himself, telling himself that tonight will be the last night, and afterward he will sever any contact with Gi-hun, allowing him to move on, safely away from him. Last night, simply because it would be an unspeakable cruelty to leave him right now, as if he means absolutely nothing to him. He convinces himself that this is about this gentlemanly gesture of goodwill, not about him wanting to feel happy for an extra couple hours - and he almost manages to fool himself. He smiles as he puts a new record in the old vinyl player in the living room.

You're just too good to be true
Can't take my eyes off of you
You'd be like heaven to touch
I wanna hold you so much
At long last love has arrived
And I thank God I'm alive
You're just too good to be true
Can't take my eyes off of you

He pours himself some whiskey, feeling peace and tranquility in his chest - the calm before the storm. Covering his eyes, he listens to the warm voice and pleasant melody, sighing

quietly but deeply. Memories flow through him in a pleasant downpour, in moonlight - all the touches, the conversations, those looks, those eyes, those eyes, those eyes, those eyes... And that sound. That sweet sound, like something breaking, just like a fracture that needs to be broken again for the bones to heal the way they should. It's hard for him to imagine life without it now - but he'll have to, and he accepts it as he once accepted his immortality. Through gritted teeth and through pain he shows no one in this world.

Pardon the way that I stare
There's nothing else to compare
The sight of you leaves me weak
There are no words left to speak

The door opens - hesitantly and familiarly - and In-ho smirks faintly, not turning to face Gi-hun yet, only making the music a little quieter. Without saying anything, he pours whiskey into a second glass and holds it out towards the man. The man takes it, and In-ho turns to face him, his waist resting on the table behind, looking back at Gi-hun thoughtfully and calmly. The scar on his lip, even though In-ho had taken care of it yesterday, will probably adorn the man's face for a long time to come, but the vampire likes it. Albeit not as much as the scattering of dots on that poor neck.

As he gives himself time to admire the results of his labor, Gi-hun stares back at him, holding the glass of whiskey in his hand. He licks his lips awkwardly - a move that In-ho immediately clings to with his gaze without much thought - and exhales softly. “We never finished our conversation yesterday,” Gi-hun remarks in a soft voice, as stubborn as ever even about such a small thing.

In-ho averts his gaze, pursing his lips. “Our conversation, our conversation...” he mutters, frowning slightly and tapping on the rim of his glass with the pad of his finger. He then shakes his head before looking at the man again. “Sorry, I can't seem to recall anything of the sort...” he says, and Gi-hun sighs heavily, rolling his eyes before looking at him the same way his wife once looked at him when he pulled a similar stunt in an attempt to avoid a serious conversation. In-ho doesn't hold back a faint smirk, only noticeable when looking at his face very closely. “Besides, I still can't stop thinking about how you begged me to bite you right when I-”

“I didn't *beg* for anything...” Gi-hun starts to defend himself, a slight tinge of red noticeable on his cheeks, but he immediately pulls himself back up, realizing that this was In-ho's way of trying to avoid the conversation again. “For the record, I'm not that easy to manipulate. I see what you're doing”.

“How about we go out tonight somewhere in the city?” In-ho suddenly suggests, knocking him out of his thoughts, making the man get confused and blink stupidly.

“In the city?” he repeats after him, and the vampire nods quietly. “Like... tonight?”

“It feels like I haven't done that in ages,” In-ho shrugs. “But I want to take you to one place. What do you think?”

And, just like that, he still manages to avoid a not-so-pleasant conversation, deftly and without violence. In-ho leads the man away, following him down the hallway to his office, not explaining anything until he pulls a black box with a pink bow on top out of a drawer. Gi-hun, standing nearby, watches him remove the lid with relaxed neatness before pulling out a device from there, the very sight of which makes him wince in confusion - it looked like a respirator, with a small gas tank no bigger than a phone.

“Is that really necessary?” Gi-hun awkwardly clarifies, looking incredulously at the thing, and then with charming hope in his eyes at In-ho, seemingly indifferent. “You can just make me wear a blindfold, can't you? Because this is just kind of... too extreme already, you know?”

The vampire doesn't seem particularly impressed with such a suggestion, and he only tilts his head slightly to the side as he continues to hold out the respirator mask to him. “It's completely safe. You don't think I could knowingly harm your health when there are so many other things I need you healthy for, do you?” he asks, looking into his eyes, and Gi-hun purses his lips and, though uncertainly, still takes the respirator he's handed out, eyeing the thing in his hands.

In-ho calmly steps around him, his hand going down to Gi-hun's shoulder, squeezing a little, waiting for the man to put the respirator to his face, and only then covering his hand with his own, holding it more securely.

“On one, two...” he says in his ear, and after being silent for a few moments, he presses the button on the tank, and grayish gas fills the respirator, making Gi-hun flinch fearfully. “Three, four, five...” In-ho continues calmly, one hand supporting him from falling by the waist and the other holding the mask tightly against his face. Gi-hun's knees finally buckle and he weakens quickly and rapidly, but In-ho keeps him from falling, finally releasing the mask and using both hands to hold the man so relaxed in his tight embrace - probably his last. The vampire stares thoughtfully into the distance before lowering his gaze to his face and stroking his cheek.

Hours later, they both find themselves in a limousine speeding down a nighttime street in the capital. Gi-hun is not restrained, but there is a black bandage over his eyes, more for the fun of it. In-ho holds a glass of blood in his hand, leisurely taking sip after sip at times, never for a moment taking his eyes off that dark wavy hair, the scar on his lower lip, the charming dots on his neck. A strange, slippery thought visits him fleetingly, immediately sinking on his tongue with a new gulp of blood - how lovely it would be to look at him in the sunlight. He sighs softly, forcing himself to look away.

Gi-hun slowly comes to his senses, turning his head slightly, trying to figure out where he is and what happened to him. He tries to move his arms, realizing very soon that he is not bound, and immediately straightens up as if the memories are finally coming back to him in a cold wave. He pulls off his blindfold, blinking and looking around when he notices In-ho calmly watching him, and sighs. “That was really unnecessary,” he remarks, tossing the black cloth aside carelessly on the seat.

In-ho doesn't respond to this in any way, calmly gesturing with the palm of his hand to a small table near where Gi-hun was sitting. “Drink some water. It'll wash the taste of the

medicine off your tongue," he advises, and the man follows, pouring water from a pitcher into a glass. The car moves quickly but smoothly, and the motion is not felt inside at all, but his hands are still a little shaky, so a couple drops end up on the floor, and he curses to himself. Only now he suddenly seems to notice that he's not wearing the same clothes he fell asleep in. For some reason, he decides not to comment on this, opting instead to take a sip.

Finally he decides to look out the limo window, feeling strange after spending days on the island and in the bunker. The lights of the night city catch his eye for a few moments. "Where are we going?" Gi-hun asks, looking back at him and brushing a strand of hair away from his face.

"Just to one place, we'll grab a couple drinks," In-ho shrugs calmly, finishing the rest of the blood from his glass and placing it back on the table.

"So this is a date?" Gi-hun asks, then suddenly thinks about it for a moment. "Does that make me an escort if you're still paying me for all this?"

In-ho tilts his head to the side amusedly, holding back a chuckle. "Is it just now that it's starting to bother you?" he remarks when the car suddenly stops, and then it's only a few moments later that the doors are opened for them and they step outside. The vampire relaxedly continues to look at Gi-hun as he looks around curiously, trying to figure out what part of the city they're all in. When he looks at In-ho again and catches him staring, the man smiles awkwardly:

"You can do a lot of things to avoid conversation, huh?" he remarks.

"I don't know what you're talking about," In-ho only shrugs, stepping away from the car and placing a hand fleetingly on Gi-hun's shoulder to turn him around and prompt the man to follow him. He obeys, even though he shakes his head at his words.

It's a nice place, with pink and blue neon signs, tables by the windows, and a small stage in the corner where some young girl is currently singing. There are only a couple people behind the bar, most are sitting at tables. The voice of the beautiful singing sounds over the soft conversations of a few friend groups here and there. In-ho, taking no particular interest in the people or the interior, leads him to their place not far from the stage, as if he's been here hundreds or thousands of times. The waitress approaches them, and he doesn't even wait for a menu or cocktail list, ordering them soju and an appetizer. Gi-hun can't help but wonder if this is the same jazz club the man told him about a couple nights ago.

Before he can ask that, In-ho breaks the silence between them, adding his voice to the background noise of this bar. "Thirty years ago, that club where my wife once worked closed due to bankruptcy. I had to buy it and take care of bringing it back to its former glory - and then hand it all over to one of my assistants."

Gi-hun smiles slightly as he looks at him, sitting opposite him. "You're rather sentimental, aren't you?" he asks, watching In-ho tapping the beat of the tune with the pads of his fingers.

The vampire shrugs calmly, emotion absent on his face. "Living an eternal life without sentimentality is dangerous. One can start to feel like a god. Or worse, one can start acting

like one".

“Isn't that what the games are about?” Gi-hun asks. “You're playing god. Whether you want to or not, that's what you're doing”.

In-ho sighs, not believing himself. “Why are you so fixated on this?” he asks, leaning back on the back of the couch, looking only at Gi-hun. “Didn't I warn you from the beginning? I'm the monster that parents have been telling their children about for thousands of years to keep them from running off into the forest. I'm what scares people in the dark. What's so surprising about people dying because of me?” he tilts his head slightly. “You were aware of my nature well in advance. You accepted that nature the way some people accept ugliness in another person just because they love them,” In-ho is silent for a couple of moments, the singer's voice and the noise of other people's conversations seem to get quieter too. “Can't you accept me?”

“But you don't like all this yourself,” Gi-hun replies no louder than a whisper, with a sincere fire in his eyes, moving closer, looking at him in hopes of changing his mind. “I've seen it. Heard it in the way you talk about it. You do agree with me that it's crazy, don't you? Why don't you try not participating in the slaughter?”

That's cute, In-ho thinks almost aloofly, not moving or giving away his emotions or thoughts in any way. The way Gi-hun tries to save him, even though they've only known each other for a few days. He called him sentimental, but Gi-hun himself is clingy, like a dog sleeping on the doorstep every time his master goes somewhere. Maybe that's why when he answers, he tries to speak gently, albeit cruelly, like a bleeding man clasping his wound.

“You expect me to let go of a red-hot piece of metal, not realizing that I'm only holding it because otherwise it would end up stuck between my ribs,” he doesn't take his eyes off him. “No one will be better off if I sacrifice myself by giving this burden to someone else. It may be painful and unfair, but that's life, the way it is. It won't suddenly be kind to a monster just because he admitted his mistakes and sins. I can beg for forgiveness all I want, but that crown will still weigh just as heavy, and the metal in my fist won't cool no matter how much time passes. It's a constant”.

The waitress places their order between them; Gi-hun shifts his gaze to her, In-ho continues to stare straight into his face. Parts of him are curious if the man will find something to answer him, to continue this endless argument of realist and dreamer. Perhaps this is what they are, setting aside all the superfluous things, the dozens of labels and hundreds of little details - the realist and the dreamer. The realist who desperately hopes for a miracle he doesn't believe in, and the dreamer who has received only pain and suffering for his faith. They are alike even in places where they seem to be opposites.

He feels the urge to kiss his skin. It's like wanting to cut off your own finger while cooking dinner, or step in front of a train while standing on the subway. The call of the void. It will kill him, in a way. But he's used to dying. Another relic in the cranium of his sentiments. Those eyes.

Gi-hun finally sighs, looking at the bottle in front of him. He opens it, bringing In-ho's shot glass closer on the table to pour it for him. “Nothing lasts forever,” he says simply. “Neither

good things nor bad.”

In-ho gives those words a chance to be his consolation. He lowers his gaze too, nodding briefly. “Then perhaps this will pass too,” he says, taking the bottle to pour the drink into the man's shot glass. Placing it on the table, he takes his own, the glass reflecting the neon lights of the signs and golden lamps. His thoughts stretch nougat to the accompaniment of a woman singing somewhere behind him, and then he lets the alcohol burn his throat.

The weight of his words causes Gi-hun to pause for a long, unsure look at him. In-ho brushes the other man's anxiety aside with a slight wave of his hand, licking his lips and looking at him again.

“Indulge me,” he says calmly, ”tell me something about yourself”.

Gi-hun chuckles weakly, his gaze still slightly clouded with thoughtfulness. “Don't you know everything about me?”

“Not at all,” In-ho says. “I know the dry facts. The numbers. Dates, amounts owed. I know that you were laid off after being downsized at work, but you tried to go on strike with the other workers to force management to change their decision. I guess what happened then was the exact point of no return,” he pours Gi-hun soju into his emptied shot glass, watching as the gradually unpleasant memories itch their way through the man's shell as he awkwardly lowered his gaze, scratching the back of his head. “It surprises me, actually. How after all that life has done to you, and after all your own mistakes, you continue to see humanity all around you. I've seen hundreds, if not thousands, of people who have been broken by life and addictions in such a way that the remnants of their humanity have become more like a little rudiment. Another organ that has lost its importance in the evolutionary process and remains in the body, sometimes doing it more harm than good,” In-ho keeps his gaze on him, calm and studying. “You are different. There must be some explanation for that. So,” he takes his shot glass, ”tell me the story”.

And Gi-hun, at first at a loss for words, not quite sure what the man expects to hear, tells it nonetheless. In-ho observes how he licks his lips awkwardly at times, how his gaze sometimes wanders away, and when it finds itself fixed on his companion again, looks like that of a guilty dog. These are some scraps; if In-ho talking about his past structured it like a novel with a beginning and an end, Gi-hun's story was more like a collection of poems structured not by date or author but by theme. Instead of trying to convey the essence of his entire past in a few minutes of monologue, he recounts incidents, things he once saw or experienced. It's as if he wants to prove his point, but doesn't know which of the arguments, the examples of the past, will be more convincing. In-ho finds this worthy of his slight smile.

And that seems to be what Gi-hun decides to latch on to. His gaze barely changes, and he responds with a smile without realizing it, and then, after a moment's hesitation, pulls a new funny scene from his memory, as if now he's not trying to explain something to In-ho with arguments, but to get him to laugh. The alcohol fuels that fire in his chest, and for a moment the vampire allows himself to chuckle, to relax, to stop clinging so tightly to that cleverly constructed facade. Like a princess trapped in a tower, peering out the window to admire her savior trying to make her laugh and entertain her. The image itself is ridiculous, and In-ho is

amused. This must be the last of the wonders Gi-hun will have time to show him, delighting him.

After a while, they leave the bar because In-ho decides that the man in front of him has had enough alcohol and could use some oxygen. Gi-hun continues to tell stories from his short life in comparison to In-ho's as they walk side by side on sidewalks and parks to an unknown destination.

At one point, the storytelling is interrupted when Gi-hun notices a cat standing in an alleyway.

He approaches her, asking her name in drunken tenderness, as if she's capable of answering him something. In-ho amusedly remains standing nearby, watching with a faint smile on his lips, and then Gi-hun takes the white cat in his arms and drags In-ho by the sleeve behind him, into the convenience store. “I hope you still have some money with you. And don't you dare give this cat a headache!” he says as he walks inside, and In-ho finds himself only able to silently watch him as he picks out something for the cat, continuing to talk to her, and then feeds her fish, back in the same back alley. She eventually runs off with the fish head somewhere far away, and Gi-hun sighs a little sadly as he looks after her. They continue on through the night streets.

Some more time passes when Gi-hun suddenly stops mid-sentence. “Wait,” he flinches, looks around, and then takes the man's hand to lift the sleeve of his jacket and look at his wristwatch. “Shit, dawn's coming soon! We have to...” his voice is a little groggy and his tongue isn't obeying him well, but he looks pretty confident as he puts a hand on In-ho's shoulder. “We should head back, don't you think? Or else... *the sun!”* he says, as if it's some new word to them. In-ho would have smiled, but he's looking at his wristwatch now too, standing up straight effortlessly, letting Gi-hun lean on him.

He exhales quietly. “I suppose so,” In-ho says, feeling the pain climbing in a tangle up his throat, and swallows.

Gi-hun hardly pays attention, instead looking around again. “I think I know this place,” he remarks just as drunkenly.

In-ho smiles weakly. “Well I would hope so, you live here after all, don't you?” he asks softly, and Gi-hun blinks confusedly, starting to nod, now understanding why this neighborhood seemed familiar to him.

Suddenly it reaches him, and he turns to him sharply, looking into his eyes. The silence lasts for several heartbeats. “No,” he says, and In-ho takes it calmly.

The first stage of grief is always denial.

“No, it hasn't even been seven days yet! I want to stay with you for at least one more day, come on!”

“I'm sorry”.

“I thought you cared about my choice. My consent,” his voice a little louder as he lets go of his shoulder; he was relaxed before, and his intoxication made him soft. Now he's tense, broken, and the intoxication makes him desperate. “I'm not giving you my consent to this. I want to go back for the rest of those seven days. Why are you doing this to me now? After all that...” he bites his lip, looking at him as if he's a traitor, and though In-ho feels hurt, he doesn't let it reflect in his face, calm behind his facade.

“I'm doing what's best for you. For both of us,” he explains calmly.

“How can leaving me here be what's best for me?” Gi-hun asks. “I don't want this. I can't believe this! Was this really just some sort of a... goodbye dinner?”

“You can start a new life now,” In-ho says instead of answering, taking a step toward him, and Gi-hun takes a step back into that dark. “Just imagine it was a dream. And not even a bad one at that,” the vampire steps closer anyway, trapping him in a dead end, his back against the wall.

“Maybe I don't want to wake up,” Gi-hun doesn't take his gaze away from his eyes, stubborn even now. “That's cruel,” he says, and In-ho, trying to suppress the guilt, licks his lips before still applying his charms to him, only to calm him down without harm and put him to sleep, like a prey. Gi-hun stiffens, unable to move, and the shock of betrayal sparkles in his eyes. “No... no, no, no-no-no-no-no, no".

He resists, In-ho realizes, feeling a prick of admiration in his chest, but only shakes his head, coming quite close and not stopping that agonizing eye contact. “It'll be easier if this story gets cut off mid-sentence,” he says, his hand sliding to his lower back to keep him from falling when he gives up. “The longer I let this go on, the harder it's going to be to get this ink off the paper. Both for me and for you,” he looks into his eyes, tilting his head slightly, and sighs softly. “It's hurting you, Gi-hun. Stop resisting, I *beg* you,” he says.

“You stop resisting,” the man manages to reply with effort, and for a few moments a new light sparkles in In-ho's dark eyes, and his facial features soften, as if he's beginning to doubt - but it's at that moment that Gi-hun finally breaks under his influence, and his eyes close and his body relaxes in his arms.

He falls face first into his shoulder, and In-ho exhales, hugging him more comfortably, one hand buried in the hair at the back of his neck, looking at the wall in front of him with a heavy pensive expression on his face.

He walks into his house without needing an invitation, taking the man in his arms inside and placing him gently into bed. It's only minutes until dawn, and spending all day hiding afterward from the sun, making his way back to the island, definitely sounds tiring, but he still doesn't find the energy to rush. He first walks around the small apartment the man lives in, touches the magnets on the refrigerator and the photo frames on the walls. Peeks into the fridge, confirming that it is predictably completely empty. Finally, he pours water into a clean glass and leaves it beside Gi-hun's bed, standing still for several long minutes, looking at his face.

The light of the rising sun comes through the window inside and lays a golden streak across the man's dark hair. With the same impulse with which a human usually tries to catch a fallen knife with their hand before they have time to think about the risk of grabbing the blade, In-ho reaches out his hand, but freezes a few centimeters away. His fingers tremble slightly in the air, he thinks about it for a couple more moments, and then he runs them through his soft hair, already habitually stroking the strands as if to take away any possible nightmares.

He grits his teeth to keep himself from making a sound as at the very first moment the sunlight begins to burn his bare skin red hot.

His stamina only lasts for a dozen seconds and then he abruptly removes his hand, staring at his palm, breathing loudly and restlessly.

The sun is the only thing powerful enough to leave a scar on a vampire's skin. A scar that will never go away. That feels appropriate.

Leaving the apartment, he only hopes that this was the last irrational action this amazing man has driven him to.

Chapter End Notes

oh really in-ho? you really think this stupid subborn man will just let you leave him like this? you fool

anyway! thank you so much for all your comments, it really keeps the story going!

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At first everything that had happened had really seemed like a dream to him. Even the numbers on his account and the dots of scars on his neck couldn't convince him that the last few nights had been real and not the delirium of his sick, tortured mind, worn out by a lonely and miserable life. It all felt like a delusion, another dream within a dream. And yet, after a couple days hearing a knock on his door, he opens it completely calmly, allowing the familiar loan sharks to pin him against the wall. Only after receiving a few bruises and feeling his nose bleeding, he tells them about the money and gives them everything they demanded from him. The leader strokes his hair one last time and he looks at him in disgust, continuing to sit on the floor even as they walk away, leaving him alone. His blood doesn't taste sweet at all.

He has only left the house once before to get money out of his account. Now he decides to go outside again, as if the blows to his face helped him feel reality as solid ground beneath his feet again. He takes a shower, the water is running weakly and it's a little cold, then dresses in the same suit he woke up in back then from his long sleep. Takes with him a stack of bills, his cell phone, and a folding knife. He doesn't think he's ever parted with it since he came to his senses then. Stopping by the mirror, he scans his battered face for a couple of moments, but lingers much longer on the points of scarring on his neck. He undoes an extra button on his shirt.

For the next few days he has the same route, reliving the same scenario over and over again. He walks from his house to that particular jazz club, stopping along the way to feed a familiar cat a supermarket fish. He leaves at sunset and returns only with the first rays of the morning sun, sitting at the same table near the stage each time, drinking soju. Thoughts are spinning endlessly in his head in such a way that his head hurts almost constantly now. It takes him a few days to realize that there may be another reason for his headache. And then he starts looking - really looking.

And eventually, he notices him. Not In-ho, certainly not him - his assistant, who is looking at him and innocently drinks something red from a juice box. And, at first, he doesn't react to him, until one day he feels ready for it - and then, as he passes another back alley a couple hours before dawn, he turns around sharply and confidently, ignoring the pain in his temples, pins the young vampire against the wall, causing him to drop something from his hands and become momentarily confused, followed by a laugh flying out of his mouth.

“You're following me” he doesn't even ask, just affirms, continuing to hold him tight and look him straight in the face.

“You really think you can handle me?” the assistant asks, purposely lightly wriggling between him and the wall.

Gi-hun looks at him just as coldly as before. “If I can't, then why aren't you breaking free for real?” he asks. “Maybe you're afraid of disobeying orders?” his voice is on the threateningly

thin edge of a whisper. “I don't think your master would like it if you broke my wrist just so I'd let you go. Still, maybe you'd like to try it anyway?”

The assistant licks his lips, fangs flashing fleetingly in his mouth, but he realizes from his gaze and the expression on his face that he is right. This gives him more confidence, and he continues to steadfastly endure the headache that feels like it's drilling into his temples.

“Did he order you to follow me?” he asks, even though it's obvious. “To what end?”

“He doesn't have to explain his orders to me, sunshine, so your guess is as good as mine,” the assistant replies, continuing to look into his eyes with a smirk, but with each passing second the tension in his face becomes more and more obvious until he finally speaks his thoughts out loud. *“Damn, how the hell do you do that...”*

“Let me talk to him,” Gi-hun orders instead of answering, pressing him harder against the wall. “Or you'll have to hit me, because your usual manipulation doesn't seem to work on me now. And trust me, I can do it all night. Till the sun will come to help me out here”.

He can see how quickly the vampire is trying to think through his options. He would clearly prefer to use force, to bite him and drink him dry, but he knows full well what consequences await him then, and so he hesitates to do so.

However, before he can make his decision and begin to act on it, the silence between them is cut off by the sound of a vibrating phone in the inner pocket of the assistant's jacket.

The vampire looks down. “I think I should take this,” he says, but Gi-hun already slips his hand under his jacket himself, taking the phone from him and finally letting the assistant go. The man is clearly not happy, but only shows it with a heavy sigh. He fixes his hair and his clothes, looking in his direction.

Gi-hun only glances fleetingly at the contact's name - *“daddy”, how fucking sharp,* - before accepting the call and bringing the phone to his ear.

Before he can say anything, he already hears In-ho's voice, the one he feared he'd never hear again.

“Please let him do his job, Gi-hun”.

“His job?” the man looks back at the assistant with slight irritation. “What, you decided to let the subway boy outside so he could follow me around? Why, pray tell? Didn't you say it would be easier to cut the story mid-sentence? It doesn't look like you are ready to really commit to that yourself”.

In-ho covers his eyes, holding the phone in his hand and sighing softly, letting a small pause hang between them. “I just wanted to make sure you wouldn't do anything stupid, and that you will take the opportunity I gave you,” he replies, silent briefly. “I've heard the Maldives are beautiful this time of year. Why don't you check it out?”

“Not a fan of resort vacations,” Gi-hun replies, walking away from the back alley, and the assistant, sighing heavily, starts to follow him. “There's too much sun”.

In-ho presses his lips together, nodding briefly to the void. “Yes, I should've guessed,” he replies calmly, then sighs. “Tell me, what do you want to achieve with all this?” he falls silent for a few moments. “Are all these efforts just your way to impress me again?”

“I never tried to impress you. I was just doing what felt right,” Gi-hun replies.

“Is that what this is all about? You want to do the right thing? And what does that *'right'* look like in your eyes right now, Gi-hun?”

Gi-hun has to stop in front of the crosswalk, looking at the red on the traffic light. “Wouldn't it be better to discuss all this in person?”

“So you can manipulate me like you did last time?” In-ho smiles weakly, shaking his head. “Why are you so eager to meet me, Gi-hun? *Do you miss me so much already?”*

“I think I have the same reason that makes you keep following me,” he steps onto the road, crossing to the other side, continuing to hold the phone to his ear. “I care about you,” Gi-hun says, expecting a response, but doesn't get one, and then continues. “You didn't really expect me to just forget about everything after all those things you said, did you? After what I learned about the games? About you being its hostage?”

In-ho is silent. Exhales long and heavy, shaking his head slightly. “Unbelievable. You really act like you're some kind of hero eager to save a vampire in distress,” he chuckles weakly, looking at the burn on his left arm. “Is it worth it, Gi-hun? You're putting your life on the line trying to fight a system that treated you as gently as it could. It makes no sense for you to be angry at this system”.

“My life?” Gi-hun asks with a grim chuckle, looking around before walking further down the night street. “Do you even know anything about what my life is like? I'm... *miserable*. With money or not, it doesn't matter, and you know that as well as I do,” he walks into the supermarket, the cat standing in front of the door managing to rub against his legs, recognizing him by his scent. “And I'm not angry at the system. I just believe you can be saved”.

“I don't want to be saved”.

“Didn't we agree not to lie to each other?” Gi-hun remarks, listening to the silence in response as he pulls a fish out of the freezer. “If you didn't want this, you wouldn't have told me anything. You wanted comfort,” he says.

“Wanting comfort is not the same as wanting salvation, Gi-hun,” In-ho remarks softly.

“I can offer you comfort,” Gi-hun says, pausing to listen to the breathing on the other side of the call. In-ho doesn't say anything, covering his eyes and resting his head on the back of the chair. “You know I'm stubborn and stupid. I won't give this up until I get what I want”.

“So what are you going to do if I just hang up?” he asks. “If I stop looking out for you? If I disappear into the darkness?”

“You won't do that.”

In-ho is forced to silently admit this is true. “I can look out for you in other ways, you know. Money can buy a lot of things. Bugs, cameras.”

Gi-hun chuckles with a shake of his head, walking out of the supermarket. A familiar cat is waiting for him by the door, and an assistant sits beside it, stroking the animal's head, smiling nonchalantly at him. The man ignores him. “I'll be miserable then. Do you think you'd enjoy watching this through the security cameras outside my house?”

“That would disappoint me,” In-ho replies calmly.

“Then let's meet.”

The vampire presses his lips together, closing his eyes, and remains silent for a while before answering. “It would be better if we don't,” he says cautiously, and then, after being quiet, decides to change the subject somewhat. “Are you familiar with the tale about the Bluebeard? A wealthy aristocrat who has given his young wife keys to every chest of gold in the house, but forbids her to open one mysterious chamber. One day she disobeys him and opens the door, discovering pools of blood and the bodies of all his ex-wives. The sight was so cruel and frightening that she drops the key and only much later notices that it has a bloodstain on it. She tries to clean it off, but fails. And yet, even if she had succeeded, wouldn't her husband have realized that she had seen his terrible secret? Wouldn't she behave differently, look at him differently?” In-ho reasoned, examining the red burn on his arm in the semi-darkness, and then sighed quietly. “I'm not the damsel in distress in this story, Gi-hun. I'm one of the monsters, no matter how gentle I am with you. And if you had come back, sooner or later you would have realized that,” he says softly, hearing the rain starting to fall on the other side of the call. “I don't think I would have been able to handle it.”

Gi-hun doesn't hide from the drops, standing not far from the store in the light of the street lamp. He presses his lips together, holding the phone with his freezing hand. “So you're going to keep torturing yourself?” he asks. “Running these games. Serving those you despise. Is that your plan for eternal life? To kill hundreds of people every year and silently hate yourself afterward? And I'm just a moment, a couple days' entertainment easy to forget?”

“You can't convince me to stop the games, no matter how many righteous speeches you preach,” In-ho replies with restraint, and then Gi-hun is silent for a while.

He manages to count ten heartbeats before new words are heard on the other side of the call. “Then let me enter the games”.

At first he thinks he misheard it. He blinks a couple times, freezing, looking at the man's figure through the broadcast from the camera in his assistant's tie clip. The young man is a little surprised himself, raising his eyebrows at hearing a snippet of others' conversation.

Gi-hun, on the other hand, continues to wait for a response, even turning his phone once to see if In-ho had dropped the call.

“To what end, pray tell?” he finally asks.

Gi-hun licks his lips nervously, looking around before leaning his shoulder against a pillar. His hair and clothes are quickly getting wet under the increasing downpour. “The winner is meeting with you, right? So you can offer two prizes to choose from. Isn't that correct?” he says, and In-ho tilts his head, looking intently at the drip-blurred image on his screen.

“To win the games, you have to see 455 other players die. You have to deceive and kill, with your own hands or some other way,” he remarks and hears silence in response. “Would you really go that far *just* to see me, Gi-hun?” In-ho smirks slightly, shaking his head. “I don't think so, my dear. You couldn't even stab an immortal vampire when asked to do so. You don't have it in you”.

Gi-hun presses his lips together, answering nothing to that. In-ho can feel the bees buzzing in the man's head in a restless swarm as he tries to think through his answer. The vampire is about to continue, to say something softer and calmer to end the conversation, when suddenly he notices Gi-hun lowering his hand with the phone clutched in it and turning to his assistant.

In-ho only has time to mentally ask himself a question about what he has in mind when he gets a very sudden and vivid answer - after just a moment's hesitation, Gi-hun pulls out a knife from his jacket pocket and sharply stabs it right into the young vampire's chest, looking him straight in the eyes.

The vampire stares at him in surprise as the man pulls the folding knife out of his body, then drops his gaze to his chest and the red stain that has soiled his shirt and tie. With a cluck of his tongue, he adjusts his clothes.

“Rude. That'll never wash off,” he remarks, but Gi-hun, after looking at him for only a few more moments, turns away again, bringing the phone to his ear. “You could have at least warned me, I would have taken it off so I wouldn't have gotten anything dirty, you know, I'm always happy to help you prove a point...”

He ignores him, all his attention on In-ho. “Satisfied?”

“Not the word I would have chosen,” In-ho says thoughtfully. “Impressed, I suppose. But no, I'm not satisfied with what you're trying to prove. Why are you so eager to get into these games?” he asks, but then it suddenly comes to him. *“Wait,”* a slight admiring smirk appears on his face. “Were you really going to use my *affection* for you to stop the games for good?” In-ho asks, receiving an awkward silence confirming his concerns in response. “Put yourself in danger so I'd *have* to save you? I've already told you that you're amazingly consistent in your desire to use self-harm to manipulate me”.

“Are you scared?” Gi-hun has the nerve to ask.

In-ho hums. “That depends. Are you trying to save me or the players?”

“Both would be nice,” the man replies.

“Then I'm horrified,” In-ho says, standing up to pour some blood into his glass. “To simultaneously sympathize with both the dragon and the people of the city it burns. It takes a special kind of character to do that. I can't imagine what it must be like to be inside your head. It has to be exhausting”.

“Some days are better than others.”

“Of course,” In-ho brings the glass to his mouth and drinks the whole thing in a gulp. Then he puts that one back down and sighs, glancing at his wristwatch. “No”.

Gi-hun stiffens before frowning. “No?”

“I'm not letting you into the games” he replies. “It would end up messy and bloody. You'd probably try to save someone you don't even know anything about and I'd end up having to drink your dead blood. I don't want to do that again, I've already drunk enough of it,” In-ho coldly remarks, returning to his chair, tucking his hair back from his forehead.

Gi-hun is silent, and that silence is heavy, though it doesn't last too long. “So what now? You think I'm just going to give up and let it go?”

“No,” In-ho answers honestly. “But I wish you would. Take a ticket on the nearest flight to anywhere and fly off to a place where I'll never find you. I know you won't do that. But if I could, I'd make you to,” he admits, biting his lip before continuing. “If my words mean anything to you, Gi-hun, I'd like you to leave this all behind,” he pauses to take a breath. “Goodbye”.

Gi-hun hears the call drop and stares at the phone screen confused before looking around and realizing that the assistant had disappeared somewhere.

He was alone again.

Chapter End Notes

in-ho be careful he can start thinking about cutting his hair really short now. painful break up can do this to people. you don't want this in-ho...

anyways! loved your comments, some of them even made me laugh lol <3 I appreciate the way you express interest in this story and I hope you'll like the rest of it as well! I think we have like 2 or 3 chapters left, but I'm not sure yet... I'll try my best to not make you wait for too long for the next one ♡

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gi-hun wouldn't be himself if he didn't keep trying, even when there was no point, even when day after day he wasn't even one step closer to his goal. The problem was that he had nothing but memories and places. Visiting them made him feel like a ghost. The subway, the jazz club, the supermarket with the cat living nearby, the alleyway outside his house. There was also no point in trying to find that island, unfortunately - he'd never been good at navigating in the open, much less at sea, and the chances of finding that one among what must have been hundreds of others were less than zero. So, in a word, it all was futile.

It was tiring. One day someone knocks at his house, but it turns out to be only his old friend inviting him to drink soju and bet on horses. And, even if only for a few moments, Gi-hun does consider trying to go back to that past, to his pathetic and ridiculous existence. To bet all his money on one wretched horse and lose every single dime. To have In-ho grinning somewhere out there, watching him through the cameras. To have him contact him again, trying to stop him from traveling down that road to the bottom. He doesn't.

Other, noticeably darker and bolder ideas visited him. He stood one day not far from his house, looking directly into the CCTV camera, aware that a pair of dark eyes were watching him, and brought the very same folding knife to his neck. Closing his eyes, he almost forces himself to touch his throat with the blade, but he abruptly changes his mind at the last moment, realizing that he can't do that to In-ho. It would be cruel. The vampire's words about dead blood reminds him of itself in a way he didn't want it to. Gi-hun puts off this final action, putting the knife away and sitting down on the steps, hiding his face in his palms. He doesn't know how long he sits there in one place.

The scar on his lip won't heal, nor will the dark red dots on his neck. Every time he looks at them in his reflection, he remembers all the emotions In-ho evoked in him. He remembers the wave of adrenaline and the peacefulness that warmed him immediately after. It was like a drug that the vampire had gotten him hooked on and now refused to give him a new dose. It was cruel, and Gi-hun thinks about hating him for the first time - and it scares him in the same instant. This emotion feels new, and he doesn't want it.

He can't truly hate him. In-ho has become nothing less than the meaning of life to him. If it hadn't been for that one random encounter, if he hadn't run into that back alley then, if he hadn't hit him without noticing in the dark - Gi-hun is sure he'd be dead by now. And not even because of the loan sharks, not really.

He had no one. No mother, no wife, no one but a couple of friends who were dragging him down into more debt with each new encounter. And now? Now he had these memories, this idea, a reckless and naive goal. To help In-ho. To be with him. Even if only for a brief moment in the midst of his eternity. To make him laugh, smile, show his humanity. To kiss him, feeling his bold hands in his grown-out strands, and to bite him with his human teeth,

just because Gi-hun feels like it would amuse him. He can almost imagine it. Sometimes he sees it in his dreams.

He began to sleep in the light of day. His nights were taken up with searching - foolish, fruitless, desperate. If he could only find some player, someone with a beige card with three geometric figures similar to the ones on his own! He would have fought over that card. Would have gotten into games. Just to see him again, just to talk to him again...

But here he was, sitting at that very table in a jazz club, and he had no idea how to make this man reappear in his life. No matter how hard he tried, it continued to feel like that moment in a chess game when you have to wait either for your opponent's next move or for his timer to run out and declare him the winner. He himself is unable to do anything, frozen in front of the board while the person he was playing with went somewhere, as if he wasn't even going to come back. He could try shouting his name into the void or slashing his skin in front of everyone to get his attention, but it still seems empty, useless. So he just sits still, feeling like a ghost, and yet more alive than ever before he met In-ho.

“Excuse me, mister,” a smiling young waitress appears by his table and suddenly places a glass of red wine in front of him. Gi-hun flinches as if hearing a gunshot. “This is the gift our regular asked me to give you. And also this,” the girl takes some envelope from the tray and places it with a smile next to the glass.

“Your regular?” Gi-hun looks at her confusedly, immediately taking the envelope, feeling a shiver go through his body.

The girl nods. “He left just before you came in. I tried to get his name for you, but he said it wouldn't be necessary,” she shrugs before walking away when she is called by other clients at a table nearby.

Gi-hun looks at the envelope in his hand, feeling his heart beating restlessly in his chest. After hesitating, he twirls it around in his hands, not noticing any writing on the outside except for the pattern of a square, triangle, and circle in the corner. Exhaling, he licks his lips and hurriedly opens it with trembling fingers, pulls out the half-folded sheet of writing, feeling his breath catch, and runs his eyes over the words written there, stumbling over some of them like they were stones.

My dearest, Gi-hun,

I know it's naive, but I really hoped you'd try to make a fresh start. Believe it or not, I wanted the best for you from the very beginning, even when I first saw you in that back alley. My vision of that “best,” of course, has changed from one image to another a couple of times, from a quick and merciful death to a long life somewhere warm, where you would be protected from my fangs by the bright shining of the sun. And yet, I have always wished for you nothing but what would be good for you. Sadly, I myself certainly can't be that “good”, Gi-hun, but I can see that you don't really seem to care. It was rather odd to expect otherwise, though, considering you've been smoking for over a decade and spending almost

as many years gambling and drinking. You don't want what's best for you, you want what will make you feel something, don't you? Even if it's only pain.

I watch these games, the trash you stubbornly convinced me to see people in, but I can only think of two things, you and your words. This time they voted to leave after the first game, can you imagine? And I let them go. Almost all of them came back again, as soon as they felt how miserable their existence in this world was. Now almost half of the people who came back are dead. People are attacking each other because this world has driven them to this desperate, bestial state. I look at them and I can't help but wonder, where exactly in them would you be able to see the humanity, theis thing you've talked so much about? I gaze into their faces and watch their every action in a way I never have before. And sometimes, very rarely, I see what you meant then.

They share food with each other, cheer for each other, joke around even in this cursed place. They protect each other, divided into small factions by chance. One man here, he saved another man's life during the first game, though he could have let him die and not risked his own life. He had no reason to do that, other than his humanity. Pure altruism. I have to admit, it's inspiring.

He died in tonight's game because this man he saved tricked him so he could stay alive himself. I think he'll be the one to take all the prize this time around - if I were betting, I'd bet on him.

Player 218. If you only knew who he was. Fate has a peculiar sense of humor, and it's certainly not kind to you and me. But I know better than to make you worry about something you can't control. Still, I wish him the best on your behalf. I only wonder, how much humanity you'd see in him now? This place changes people.

We can only hope he tries to help the family of the man who got him to this point. Money, though, is unlikely to be a good consolation - for the family of that player or for the winner. He doesn't know that yet. They never know until it's too late.

The VIPs are coming tomorrow night. I will have to meet them, hiding behind my mask. They'll drink and talk about their bets, use my workers as blood bags or sex-toys, and all I can think about is that I'm just like them, and you don't see that, and it makes me feel like a fraud. What have you seen in me that my soul has never been filled with? I am now curious if your perception has changed me, just as the fact of observation determines the movement of the smallest particles in that physical experiment. There are thoughts floating through my head, the ones that haven't been there in a long time, all because of you. Is this humanity? Would it be humanity if I added a drop of poison to their glasses of blood? If I blow the place up, forcing them out into the scorching sun in the middle of the day, where they all rot quickly under its rays? Is that cruelty, or is that humanity? The lines are blurred. Or I have worse eyesight than you.

You saw the best in me. I never said it was your fault.

You should have been free, Gi-hun. A bird that breaks out of its cage as soon as the man who picked it up off the street opens the door for it. I fixed your wing, but for some reason you don't want to fly further from the darkness of my world. It makes me wonder if you really see

something good at the end of this story or if you just want to go down in this ship with me, just so you don't have to fly without purpose over this restless dark ocean. I think I already know the answer. Do you?

I'm giving you one more chance to fly away. The cage is open. Bluebeard is on a trip, far away from you. Pack your bags, grab the gold and run into the sun. It'll protect you from me.

Take care of yourself.

Yours,

Hwang In-ho

P.S. I hope you enjoy the wine. I've been told it's a bit sweet. That's how I prefer my red, if you recall.

Gi-hun looks at the letter in his hands, still feeling the weight of anxiety in his heart. He rereads some passages over and over again, remembering the wine glass only for the third time, and takes it, hesitantly taking a sip, thinking about his words. Is his blood really sweet to him? The wine feels strange on his tongue at these thoughts. He was more used to soju. And this stuff tasted too expensive for his pocket anyway.

He is in no hurry to get home. He reads the letter over and over again, as if trying to figure out what he should do next, when suddenly it's like he's struck by lightning - Hwang In-ho. His name. Until this moment, he had not known his name, had addressed him mentally in a very vague way, only in pronouns. In-ho had never told him his name before. Gi-hun had not dared to ask. Now he had told him himself. But why? Was it a promise? Or a farewell?

Thoughts run through his head. He asks the waitress for a piece of paper and she tears it out of her notebook, giving him a pencil as well. He writes a short message on it to leave it to the same girl, asking her to give that to this regular customer if he happens to show up here again.

Something good will happen at the end. I'm ready to bet my blood on it.

P.S. The wine's not very good. I liked your whiskey better.

He drinks the wine in a volley and tucks the letter back into the envelope he stashes in the inside pocket of his jacket before standing up and walking purposefully towards his house - the first time so far before dawn. His breathing is still agitated, his heart beating in his chest with palpable eagerness, his thoughts returning again and again to everything he's read. Player 218. In-ho hints to him that he knows him, that it's someone from his life. Gi-hun doesn't know what to do now, because all of this makes him even more anxious. Yet those thoughts are abruptly silenced, as if after a blow to the head, when he suddenly stops near a familiar supermarket to find that his cat is already eating some fish in the back alley.

Gi-hun looks at this, and even though he realizes that she could have been fed by anyone on the street, his whole being tells him, starting to pump blood faster through his veins - it was him! The man looks around, as if hoping to see a familiar silhouette somewhere nearby, but it's all to no avail, and his head doesn't even begin to feel the sharp pain, so he looks at the cat again, before heading onward with an even faster stride to get to his house sooner, as if he could be there. No, he knows he's there.

He steps inside, freezing on the threshold, hesitating for a couple moments before turning on the light and looking around the room. There was no one in there, and yet something was off. Gi-hun searches for it with his gaze, and finds it - there it is, a lone blood red rose lying on the table, and he walks over to it, taking it, immediately feeling its thorns pierce his skin, making him bleed. He looks at the drop running down his finger below, wondering if that was the vampire's intention, but then he notices a small beige business card with familiar figures on the table. He grabs it, turning it over, but sees only a short note instead of a number:

It feels like our roles have reversed. I run, you chase.

How about another game?

October 31, HDH Club

Will you be able to win your present?

Gi-hun glances at the calendar. His days have blended into one lately, but he still forces himself to gather his thoughts and realizes that October 31 is tomorrow. But didn't In-ho write in that letter that the VIPs are supposed to fly in tomorrow night? Doesn't that mean he'll be on the island to oversee the games? Then again, maybe he won't be at that club. Maybe his assistant will be there - or even just something like a gift, literally, in that silly black box with a pink bow on top. Gi-hun looks at the rose in his hand again, then at the note stained with his blood, and bites his lip.

No matter what, he'll have to go to that club. In-ho has returned to the chessboard and moved the pieces, trapping him, and now it's time for him to make a move. The heart in his chest goes back to a restless rhythm, but he catches himself breaking out into a slight smile.

In-ho doesn't want to lose him either.

He squeezes the stem of the rose harder in his palm.

Chapter End Notes

was it casual when he wrote you a freaking love letter yall?

Anyway, imagine In-ho studying the files of the players who survived another game and accidentally stumbling upon a name he heard Gi-hun mention when he told him the story about his past. Imagine him realizing that even as he tries to distract himself and

dive into his work, he just can't help but stumble upon another reminder of the one who has consumed his thoughts. He looks at Sang-woo and feels the house of cards he has been working so hard to build just fall down with a slight, usually insignificant breeze. I believe at that moment he thought, “I really can't run away from you, can I?” and gave up on this.

But what will happen now? Well, the next chapter will be a big one, I'll probably make you feel a bit nervous. But don't forget that I love you, okay? Okay.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On Halloween night, the line in front of the club is quite long, and it's so crowded inside that it makes it hard to breathe at first. He walks through the crowd of dancing, drinking, and flirting people in masks and costumes, looking around, desperately hoping to catch a glimpse of some clue, something that might give him a hint of where to look to understand this new game, the rules of which no one has bothered to explain to him. The loud music makes him nervous against his will, but he keeps his cool, trying to stay on guard every moment, eventually finding himself near the bar. He's not sure where to act from now, so he stops to think.

There are people around in various costumes - sexy zombies, sexy ghosts, sexy vampires, and so on down the list. Looking at them, he continues to keep his hands in the pockets of his jacket, clutching his folding knife, and then a new idea finally pops into his head. Swallowing, he unfolds it without taking it out of his pocket and, after hesitating only a couple moments, clutches the blade tightly in his palm.

Gi-hun grits his teeth to keep from making a sound of pain, feeling the blood begin to flow from the fresh wound. Licking his lips, he quickly removes his hand from his pocket, staining his neck and face red. His heart is beating anxiously somewhere inside. He once again tries to find someone - anyone - in this crowd around him.

Then, suddenly, he feels a hand clutching his wrist.

Gi-hun turns around sharply, startled, and sees a familiar smile with two fangs. *“So impatient,”* the assistant says, and then yanks the man out of this crowd, pinning him against the wall, holding him firmly in place with a definitely inhuman strength.

No one is paying attention, and Gi-hun knows better than to resist, so only tenses in the other man's grip, looking boldly into his eyes.

The young vampire squints slightly as he looks at him, and tilts his head slowly to the side, as if studying him. His gaze slides lower, and then he pulls his free hand to his cheek, slowly tracing a finger along his cheekbone, picking up the trail left by the blood, and then slips that finger into his mouth, tasting it like it's whipped cream on top of a birthday cake at a party where he's just an insolent guest. His dark eyes sparkle in that darkness, blue light running down his face, and he looks into his eyes greedily, hungrily again, smirking.

“I can see why the boss likes to hang out with you so much,” the assistant says, licking his lips. “But that was reckless. Do you have any idea how many young and inexperienced vampires there are in this place right now? And, *unlike me,* they weren't given an order not to drink you, sunshine. The only reason no one's used you like a juice box yet is those cute little dots of ownership around your neck. They scare the ho's away,” he presses two fingers against one of the scars near his caddy, and Gi-hun swallows, never for a moment stopping to

look into the dark eyes, as if looking away would be considered a weakness. “You know he did that on purpose? We can bite without leaving our scent on the prey. Otherwise it would be a mess, don't you think? But he wanted you all to himself. *That old sentimental asshole”.*

“And you lick your master's shoes with that mouth?” Gi-hun asks, feeling his heart pounding in his chest in maddening fear in contrast to his confident appearance. Like a rabbit being hugged by a boa constrictor, he recalls.

The assistant laughs. “Yeah, well, the odds are high there won't be any shoes for me to lick soon, so,” he remarks.

Gi-hun stiffens, his eyebrows furrowing slightly. “What do you mean?” he asks, the alarm in his voice making the young vampire smirk, the devil dancing in his eyes. “Where's In-ho?”

“Not here,” he replies. “And he won't be here. He's on the island. With the *VIPs, ”* he spells the last word, savoring it, and then grins. “Getting ready for the final game. He sent me here to take care of you. He gave those stupid instructions... like he thinks I'm a complete moron and won't figure out what's on his mind,” irritation and almost anger creeps into his voice, and Gi-hun tries to figure out what he means, feeling like he's missing something very important.

And then - it hits him like a bolt of lightning. Those lines in the letter, about poisoning the VIPs or blowing up the island. Is he really gonna do it? Despite his certainty that it's doomed? Gi-hun hears his own heart in his ears.

“Daddy's not going to live to see the morning. There's just no way he's gonna make it. They're going to take him with them, and it's going to hurt, and it's going to be bloody, and then they're going to come after me because I'm his little brat...” he presses him a little harder against the wall with his hand. “And all this just because you can't take your money and get out of the country like a normal person would,” the assistant says, sliding one hand to his neck and suddenly squeezing it, looking him straight in the eye. “You should have gotten on a plane and gotten the hell out of here. Now it's all falling apart and he's going to die. Because of your stupid speeches. I hope you're happy now”.

Gi-hun feels an emptiness in his stomach, and it's as if someone is squeezing his heart painfully hard just as the assistant is squeezing his throat. His hand weakens, but the grip on his heart continues to burn him painfully, exactly like it's a red-hot chain, tightening harder and harder inside his body into a disgusting knot. “Why did he send you here?” Gi-hun asks. “I doubt he wanted you to just tell me all this.”

“He didn't order me not to, his fault,” the assistant replies instantly, continuing to stare into his eyes. He then sighs, no longer holding him so tightly against the wall, lowering both hands. “Please follow me for our last game, Seong Gi-hun,” he says in a different, calmer voice already, as if putting on his old, familiar mask again, and turns around, heading towards the stairs to the second floor.

Gi-hun follows him, looking around awkwardly and anxiously. His thoughts are filled with suffocating unease, but he doesn't allow himself to think of the worst. In-ho can do this, he'll

be fine. He wouldn't have taken this move if he didn't have a plan, he's not like Gi-hun. He must have a way to survive this.

He follows the young man into the room. When the door closes behind him, all the music is suddenly barely audible, and that makes it worse, as if even his quietest thoughts are now discernible in this silence.

Gi-hun swallows, running his eyes over the entourage of the place - pink walls, a black floor with pink fur rugs, a black leather couch. And on it is a young man who looks like he's sleeping, but he's so pale that Gi-hun immediately realizes that the poor guy has actually passed out from the amount of blood that has been drunk from him. There's red left on his neck, and plenty of fresh bites. Gi-hun now thinks about how restrained In-ho really was with him, and how well he controlled himself all this time without bringing him to this state.

Fuck. He misses him.

The assistant, as if not even paying attention to him, sits down next to the boy, and points Gi-hun with a gesture to the black chair. “Please”.

Gi-hun looks at him glumly and warily, but sits down in the chair nonetheless. The assistant calmly pulls out his briefcase from under the table between them and opens it, entering some combination of numbers. Looking at the contents for a couple of moments, he pulls out two things - a black bag with contents as yet unknown to Gi-hun and a small black box, both tied with pink ribbons. He puts the briefcase back on the floor.

He picks up the box first without opening it. It's smaller than his palm, and he shakes it, looking at Gi-hun with a slight smile. “This is your prize. Curious what's inside?” the assistant tilts his head slightly, pausing for a moment before continuing. “It contains a small vial of blood. His blood. You drink it and you become immortal. Normally there's also the need of a bite for that, but... well, you clearly did that already,” he chuckles softly, and then places the box on the table.

“Why would I want this?” Gi-hun asks, and the young man laughs softly, shaking his head.

“Gosh, you're fascinating. Usually people don't need a reason to become an immortal being,” he remarks, but then still sighs as he replies. “Well, specifically for you, Bride of Frankenstein, I can think of one more reason. Think about it yourself. If he doesn't succeed, how are you going to beat this system that destroyed him, being a normal human? The odds are better when it's vampire against vampire. A more level playing field. Don't you think?”

Gi-hun remains silent, exhaling quietly and looking warily at that box in the young man's hands. He doesn't answer anything, shifting his gaze to him expectantly. Is this really the Plan B that In-ho came up with, taking a reckless risk? No, no, it must be something else. Something he can't see - at least not yet. Another meaning hidden between the lines.

The assistant smirks, placing the box on the edge of the table, and now unties the pink ribbon from the pouch, pouring its contents into his palm. It now reveals several marbles, some of which were red and some were white. “Since my still living master has made himself quite clear by ordering me not to do you any harm, we'll have to adapt the rules of the game

somewhat to keep this at least mildly interesting," he begins, tossing the marbles onto the table. "The rules will be simple. We're only playing five rounds. I'll take a few white colored marbles and a few red colored ones, clasp some of them in my palm, the others tucked back into the bag. You have to guess whether there are more red or white marbles in my hand. If you guess, you earn one point and the chance to ask me any question you want. About the games, about me, about my master. Anything at all. And I'll answer. You earn more than three points from the game and the prize is yours."

Gi-hun looks at him tensely. "And if I don't guess?" he asks.

"That's a valid question," the assistant smirks and praises, then straightens up, fixing his tie. "Well, every time you guess wrong, this nice guy will have to suffer," he calmly points his palm at the unconscious young man lying there, and Gi-hun flinches. "I think he's got about three more bites of life left in him. That works for us".

"Why does it have to be him? Let him go," Gi-hun says, and the young vampire laughs.

"Geez, where does that come from?" he asks and shakes his head. "Sorry, I'm forced to exist under the conditions set by my superior. If I was deciding anything, I'd gamble on your blood. Every loss is a bite. That would be nice, but, unfortunately..." the assistant sighs, "I'm just physically incapable of hurting you, Seong Gi-hun. Therefore, this boy will have to suffer for you."

Gi-hun stares at him with his lips pressed tensely together, keeping his gaze on his face.

"Or you could just give up the game," the young man remarks. "And leave, taking the consolation prize," he says, pulling an airplane ticket from his inside jacket pocket and placing it on the opposite edge of the table. "The choice is yours".

Thoughts run through his head. He's trying to find a loophole, some way he can save this innocent guy's life, and that thought process is reflected in his face as the assistant watches him carefully and with a slight satisfied smirk.

Gi-hun is silent for a few long moments, until suddenly his expression changes as the right thought catches up with him, and he looks up at the vampire. "Is that how he phrased it? You can do no harm to me, is that it?" he asks, and the young man squints his eyes slightly and nods, still awaiting his answer with mild curiosity. Gi-hun licks his lips and tries to relax in his chair, keeping confidence in his voice and gaze. "Then we won't gamble on his blood. We'll gamble on mine, just like you want".

The assistant tilts his head slightly to the side, studying him with his gaze. "And how so, pray tell?"

"You can do no harm to me," he repeats, slipping his hand into his pocket and pulling out a folding knife, revealing its blade with a slight movement. "I can".

Something flashes in the young vampire's gaze, and the corner of his lips twitch in a smirk, as he also relaxes back on the couch, humming. "You bet your blood?" he asks.

Gi-hun nods slowly. “Yes,” there's calmness and determination in his eyes.

The vampire looks at him intently for a long few moments, then nods in response. “Very good. Yes, I think that will do,” he says, pondering for a few more moments before smirking slightly. “But then you'll have to cut your skin yourself, since I can't stab or cut you. And if you don't have the guts,” he tilts his head slightly to the side, ”we'll have to go back to my plan A. Deal?” the assistant asks, holding out his hand.

Gi-hun hesitates for only a few moments, his gaze sliding to the box with the pink bow in the corner of the table before resolutely reaching forward and shaking his hand. The young vampire grins smugly, like a cat, and as soon as he lets go of his hand, he sweeps almost half the stones from the table into his palm without even looking, all of them back into the black pouch. Still not taking his eyes off his opponent, he pulls a few stones out of it, clenching them tightly in his fist, and holds it out in front of him.

“More red or white?”

There's no way to know for sure. He lowers his gaze to the table, to the pair of marbles he hadn't picked up. There are only four of them, one red and three white. He chose them without looking, so as not to give everything away with his face, and it's a mystery to him, too. One could rely on probability theory and say that there are more red ones in his hand - or one could trust his intuition and choose the white one. But, through years of gambling, betting on horses, Gi-hun has learned that both probability theory and his intuition are all equally useless. His odds are fifty-fifty.

“White,” he decides, looking him straight in the eye, and the vampire squints, looking back at him. The few seconds before his palm opens seem like an eternity, but then he turns his fist over and opens it, and their gazes drift down to count the marbles. There are three.

Two white and one red.

The first and easy win makes his heart explode with happiness, like every time the horse he bet on won. He smiles, just like that time in the subway, defeating that stranger in ddakji for the first time, and looks at him. Just like that time, the young man smiles calmly.

“Congratulations, player. You have earned one point and can ask me one question,” he says, once again throwing all the marbles out of his hand and out of the bag onto the table.

Question. That's right, he can find out something, get information. But what to ask? The vampire had said he could find out absolutely anything he wanted to know, about him, about the game, about In-ho. Perhaps he should have thought about that before he started playing.

He thinks about what would be most useful to him, and finds that question after all. “How do I get to that island where the games are held?”

The assistant considers messing with him and saying only part of the answer, but eventually, thinking it wouldn't be as interesting, decides to give a more complete one. “Several ways. You can become a player, and you can become one of the guards by getting one of two cards with a number on it. I do player recruiting, guard recruiting is another errand boy's duties.

Usually they are ex-military or relatives of those who participated in the games or already worked for us. Sometimes ex-criminals, refugees from the north. But you can, of course, try to fool everyone and sneak onto the island the way the boss himself once did," the vampire shrugged. "Follow whoever was recruited, get to the departure point, get a guard suit, and blend in with the crowd. Beyond that, it's improvisation and pure luck".

Gi-hun frowns slightly, but nods, accepting that answer. The assistant smiles calmly and picks up a handful of marbles from the table again, repeating everything he did in the first round. The man looks at the five pebbles remaining on the table, most of which were white, and yet decides to once again act as his intuition tells him.

"White," he says, and the assistant unfolds his hand, revealing his palm, and they both look at the marbles. Gi-hun doesn't even need to count to realize - he's lost.

Trusting his gut against logic for the second time in a row was foolish. He swallows without looking up at the vampire, but he just calmly tosses the stones back onto the table.

Gi-hun exhales anxiously through his nose before looking up at the smiling smug young man. "So, player? Are you going to keep pretending a hero, or are we going to go back to my plan A?" he asks, tilting his head slightly to the side and casting an eloquent glance in the direction of the unconscious boy lying there.

Gi-hun presses his lips together, but his eyes fill with determination as he takes the knife, making a sharp cut on his skin under the young vampire's admiring gaze. Blood begins to flow from the wound on his wrist, and he reaches a trembling hand across the table towards him; the assistant doesn't need to hear anything else, and he grabs his palm and forearm sharply, covering the bleeding wound with his mouth. And, technically speaking, he really doesn't hurt him - even on the contrary, he heals his wound, even though he drank enough of it before doing so. It's unlikely his boss would have liked this method of circumventing his direct order, though. But it wasn't his subordinate who suggested it, right?

Gi-hun grits his teeth, enduring a slight pain and a hint of disgust. This feels wrong for some reason. He's never felt this way with In-ho.

Ten seconds later, the vampire pulls away from his scarred wound, grinning wildly, with sparks of madness in his eyes and red smudges at the corners of his mouth. He wipes them away with his handkerchief, but without much success, and contentedly takes a new batch of marbles from the table with excitement. The third round begins, and Gi-hun wins it, so it's time for a new question, and this time he decides to go all-in.

"How can I kill a vampire?"

The assistant smirks, tilting his head, looking at him with moderate curiosity. *"Are you a killer, Mr. Seong?"* he asks him with a note of teasing, but the man doesn't respond, only pressing his lips tighter together. Then the vampire sighs. "Well. There are a few options. I'm sure you already know about death by the sun. Just being under its warm rays alone brings vampires pain, but if you stay under it for, say, an hour... it's a slow and agonizing death, a torture worse than the electric chair. It's like being deep-fried. But there are more painless ways. Beheading, for example. Quick, effective. But usually you have to capture the vampire

first, or have them surrender to your mercy," he shrugs, sliding his gaze thoughtfully up to the ceiling, like he really needs to remember something else, like it's not carved into his skull. "There's also the fire. Pretty much the same here as with the sun, but it usually takes less time. Burns from fire may fade from our skin over time, unlike sunburns, but if, say, locked in a convenient corpse-burning chamber, which, by the way, there are plenty of on the island, you can kill a vampire in about five minutes. You'll have to put up with all the screaming, but you'll get the job done".

Gi-hun feels uneasy. He's thinking that In-ho is now using one of those methods on the VIPs, or even worse - he tried and got caught, and now some of that fate awaits him. And it's all because of him. Because of Gi-hun.

He swallows. "That's it?"

The assistant smirks slightly, looking at him as if he can read all his thoughts and worries. "No. There's one more way. Being poisoned by dead blood," as those words leave his mouth, Gi-hun looks at him again, exhaling, remembering In-ho's story about how he drank his dead wife's blood despite it being bad for him. "Nothing serious will happen from one glass, of course. But it does make vampires weaker and weaker, making them extremely vulnerable. If you force or trick a vampire into drinking dead blood, you can make them... almost human. They will lose their ability to regenerate, and slowly... very slowly die if you don't kill them out of mercy right away".

He falls silent, giving Gi-hun a few long moments for this information to settle heavy in his mind.

"That's all," he says and picks up a few marbles from the table again. A new round begins, the fourth already. Gi-hun looks at the number of white stones on the table and as a result says:

"Red".

The vampire opens his palm, he lowers his gaze.

"Oops," the young man smirks, showing off the two white stones in his hand. "I think we've got a tie. Two-two. The intrigue continues. Isn't it wonderful?"

Gi-hun swallows, feeling an anxious trembling in his hands. It's very noticeable when he picks up the knife, bringing it to his wrist - so noticeable that the vampire suggests, with demonstrative worry, that he go back to plan 'A' after all and enlist the 'help of a friend', but he ignores it and only bravely opens a new wound - much deeper than he should. The way his blood begins to flow so quickly frightens him, and he reaches out to the vampire, immediately feeling his mouth cover the cut.

Mentally, he counts again from one to ten. At the eighth second, he feels physically sick, and he's afraid the young man won't stop, but then he feels his tongue sliding across his wound several times, up and down, in an almost caring - though rather lewd and mocking - manner. The assistant does not take his gaze away from his eyes at this, looking just like some kind of

demon or succubus right now. Gi-hun endures this pressure, trying to hold back to the last to keep from pulling his arm out before he's done caring for his wound.

When the young man releases him, Gi-hun immediately wipes his saliva off his wrist nervously, looking not too pleased at the scar he left behind. In-ho will definitely have questions.

If he stays alive , his subconscious tells him worriedly, and he exhales, feeling a slight shiver throughout his body and weak from the loss of blood.

The last round. The decisive round. But decisive what? Would he really drink In-ho's blood to become a vampire and try to return to the island to... do what? Take revenge on those who killed him... no, no, no, no one's going to kill him. Gi-hun is sure he won't die. That wouldn't be fair, right? In-ho can't die because of the hope he put in him. That would make him... *guilty.*

“If he was already dead...” he asks, his voice hoarse, ”you'd feel it, right?”

The assistant hums, looking down, then shrugs. “As far as I know. It's kind of a one in a lifetime thing, you know. It'll be my first time,” he says and smirks slightly, tilting his head to the side. “But we can always check it out, can't we?”

With those words, he abruptly snatches a revolver from under his jacket and points it at the man sitting across from him. Gi-hun freezes fearfully, staring at him like at a madman, and is preparing for this to be the last thing he sees in his life, when he suddenly realizes that the weapon in the vampire's hand is shaking, and his face is tense and tinged with a hint of stubbornness, as if he's holding back pain.

After ten unbearably long seconds, he lowers the gun shaking violently in his hands just as abruptly as he had grabbed it before, and looks away as if in derealization before shrugging calmly.

“Still alive then. The chain around my neck is still holding me tight enough to keep me far enough away from gnawing on your bones. You're lucky,” he says indifferently, putting the revolver back away and grabbing a few marbles off the table to continue their game.

Gi-hun is still looking at him with the same tinge of not yet dead fright, but then his expression relaxes somewhat and he lowers his gaze. He's still alive. In-ho is still alive.

“Let's see how much luck you still have left in you, shall we?” he clutches some number of marbles in his palm, extending his fist towards Gi-hun. “Red or white?”

“If I lose now, what happens?” Gi-hun asks, feeling like he missed something when agreeing to this game.

“I'll drink enough of your blood for you to finally pass out,” the assistant calmly replies. “I will wait for my master to... release me, and drink you dry. You will be... my last meal, which I will, believe me, savor to the full”.

“You have no faith in your master, do you?” Gi-hun asks, smiling weakly. “You're not even considering he might survive”.

The assistant looks at him like at a naive fool, tilting his head with a slight smirk.

“Mr. Seong, I've known him almost my whole life. Ever since he found me under that bridge in the middle of the night, covered in blood. I was... I think I was fourteen then. I'd been starving for days. Lived in the cold, it was December. Little, runaway nice-looking kid. I thought I was going to die right there - from frostbite or blood loss. Pathetic. Helpless. Wounded and stained in the blood of my own father, whom I stabbed to death before running away from home,” he says, continuing to keep his hand clenched in a fist. “Mr. Hwang could tell what had happened from the first sight. Figured me out by the smell of two different types of blood. And mine was less than my father's. That piqued his interest. He approached me then without saying anything, just handed me a business card. I remember his... *calm,* calculating gaze. Like he knew exactly what he wanted to mold me into,” the assistant chuckles, shaking his head and leaning back against the back of the couch. “He was different back then. So... *cruel.* One time a guy insulted him, and he snapped his neck. Didn't even drink his blood just to emphasize that it was nothing more than a cold murder. Do you have any idea how many people he's killed with his own hands over the years? Not with games, just like that? *Hundreds,”* he utters through gritted teeth. “Workers who used the bodies of some of the women who were eliminated. Or those of them who, for money, helped some players learn the rules of the next game in advance so those players would have an advantage. Anyone who broke his rules in any way. He spared *no one”*.

Gi-hun listened to him, not daring to utter a single word. It wasn't as if In-ho had kept all this from him - after all, he himself had called himself a monster so many times, had warned him that he was no saint, that he was a creature of the night. And he had to admit - though he didn't like it, he could easily imagine this vampire with no pity in his eyes snapping the neck or shooting in the head anyone who dared to disobey his orders, to break a rule. He wasn't blind. He knew In-ho had it in him. But inside Gi-hun lived, perhaps foolishly, a hope that since he had decided to close the games now, having succumbed to the entreaties of a simple man he had known for no more than a week, that maybe there was something else Gi-hun could help him deal with. Something that he would allow him to change in himself, or channel in the right direction.

“You know, Oh Il-nam was at least being honest with himself. The old man enjoyed deaths and didn't hide it, ever. But In-ho? He pretends like he's some kind of martyr, like he's being forced to do it. Whereas in reality, people have long since ceased to be anything more than puppet theater characters in his eyes, the ones which strings he can shamelessly cut if he wants to,” the assistant chuckles and shakes his head. “Always so cold, always so distant.... Fucking king. I admired him. I really did. His anger, his rage, his power. Even before his chain was tied around my neck, I ran his errands like a dog. His most beloved servant. I used to lick other people's blood off his shoes and was happy, like I was closer to a real god next to him. But then... *you happened,*” he says and grins, licking his lips. Shakes his head. “With all that... stupid speeches about humanity, the pathetic face, and the penchant for righteous self-destruction. I guess we really are what we eat, because after he started drinking your blood, he picked up all your stupid bad habits. And now it's going to get him killed”.

Gi-hun presses his lips together, looking at him with a heavy heart and anxiety inside. His thoughts in his head are bouncing one against the other when he suddenly snags one truly important one out of them.

“What if it won't?” he asks. “What if he survives, what happens then?”

“If he survives,” the assistant chuckles, but then calmly slips his free hand into his jacket, pulling out his new phone, “I'll get a call from him and he'll give me new commands,” he says, placing the phone on the table between them. He then moves his gaze to the wall clock hanging by the door, and Gi-hun does the same. “He said the deed will be done at midnight. We have five more minutes,” the assistant smiles and extends his hand, clenched into a fist, forward again. “So? Red or white?”

Five minutes of suspense. If he loses now, maybe he won't even ask him to cut his skin, instead just waiting until midnight to chew through his neck as sloppily and brutally as this guy's that's still unconscious on the couch. But if he wins and In-ho dies anyway? Will he just trust the assistant to honor the rules of the game more than his desire to drink him as his last meal? Will the poor guy who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time become this young vampire's dinner instead as a result?

“If I win,” he says, "you'll let him go too," Gi-hun looks stubbornly into his eyes. The assistant chuckles, not averting his gaze.

“What difference does it make? Someone's going to die anyway. Not this one, then the other”.

“You can bite without killing. Bite a few if you're so hungry. Just stop in time, that's all I ask,” Gi-hun says.

The vampire looks at him, tilting his head to the side with a smile. “How human,” he hums, but then shrugs indifferently. “Sure. You win and no one dies here tonight,” he moves closer, sitting almost on the edge of the couch. “Make your choice now”.

He looks at the table where several marbles of different colors lay. He knows some other quantity lies inside the black bag. It's all sheer luck, no logic and no calculation. Gi-hun casts his gaze toward the clock again, returning to his anxious thoughts of what's going on out there on the island right now. He wants to believe that In-ho is okay, but what are the chances of that actually happening?

“Red,” he says. If he's wrong, all he's facing is death, right? He's been bitten before. It only hurts when the fangs pierce the skin. He'll be fine.

The assistant hesitates for a few more moments before turning his hand over and opening his palm. Gi-hun catches his breath, feeling the restless pace of his heart, sounding now to the beat of the ticking clock on the wall. Tick tock.

There are two marbles in his palm.

One red.

And one white.

Chapter End Notes

hehe

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The vampire sighs, almost disappointed. “Well, that's a tie. I guess we'll have to play another round,” he says, dropping the rest of the marbles out of the pouch, and Gi-hun suddenly wraps his hand around his wrist, as if moved by some disturbing invisible force.

“Wait,” the man stops him, licking his lips before lifting his gaze and staring defiantly into the vampire's dark eyes. “I have a better idea”.

The assistant looks at him calmly, squinting his eyes slightly, but he doesn't wrench his hand from the grip. “What is it?”

“I'm betting all my blood that this phone will ring,” he says, keeping his gaze on him. “If the bet doesn't play out, you'll drink me, him, *anyone* here. Try to gather your strength and run away, I don't know what other plan an unleashed and masterless wild dog might have here. I admit that all my speeches and attempts to convince In-ho to fight for what's right were a mistake, and that I'm to blame for everything, and that everything I touch turns out to be cursed. *But if he calls,”* he suddenly pulls a small pistol from his jacket pocket, putting the muzzle close to the assistant's neck. The latter repeats the same thing in the same second, and the cold muzzle of the revolver presses against his shoulder through his clothes. “If he calls, I'll tell him a little story about his beloved dog. What do you think will happen to you then?”

“What are you hoping for, pointing a gun at me like that, dummy?” the assistant chuckles, looking into his eyes. “You'll only stain the walls here with my blood”.

Gi-hun smirks. “It's not a gun, *dummy*. Did you forget?” he takes it off the safety. *“It's a lighter”*.

The man pulls the trigger, and the fire burns sharply against the vampire's skin, causing him to jerk violently against the back of the couch. With his palm, he rubs the slight red burn on his neck with a disgruntled look. His own gun lies next to him on the couch. Gi-hun chuckles, shaking his head.

“He was right. You do need a babysitter,” he says. “You know, now I understand why he put on this whole show. It wasn't me he wanted to keep an eye on. It was *you,*” Gi-hun pulls the trigger again and stares at the lighter's flame while the assistant grudgingly fixes his hair, looking at him. “If he'd let you go do whatever you wanted, you'd be in trouble. Now, because of his orders, you're forced to sit here, across from me, practicing your restraint while daddy does the real job,” Gi-hun pulls out a pack of cigarettes, calmly lights one and takes a puff, trying to relax in his chair. He glances at his watch. Two minutes. “Remember exactly what orders he gave. Not to harm me. What else?”

“To make sure you stay in this room until he calls,” the assistant replies discreetly. “Suggest you play a game. *Not* Russian roulette”.

“Imagine if he sees you with my blood on your face,” Gi-hun remarks relaxedly. “Do you need help wiping it off? There should probably be some wet wipes around here somewhere”.

“Look at him, so cocky all of a sudden. What makes you so sure he's gonna make it?” the vampire asks him, checking the ammo in his revolver.

“I'm not sure,” Gi-hun shrugs calmly, taking a drag on his cigarette. “But it's not like this is the first time I've ever placed a bet without knowing the exact outcome. It's kind of a gambler's thing. Before, a bad bet could cause me to lose money or find myself caught in a back alley between a loan shark and a wall. Now, if my bet doesn't play out, I'll just die. I'll die knowing that he at least tried to get free. What's the point of me worrying?”

“You could just walk away,” the assistant remarks. “Take a ticket off the table and get the hell out of here right now, and there'd be nothing I could do to you while I'm still on the chain. And maybe you'd even get lucky and catch a plane before I found you”.

“What's the point then?” Gi-hun asks. “If the choice is between losing my meaning in life and flying off to somewhere in the Maldives to live out my years there in silence alone, versus at least trying to believe that he'll survive and come to me... I'm willing to take the risk”.

“And *I'm* the one you call a dog”.

Gi-hun does not respond to this. The second hand hurries on the clock face closer to the fatal mark, and the vampire picks up the loaded revolver again and straightens his arm, the muzzle pointed at the man's shoulder area - to keep him from dying instantly, to have time to drink him before the blood is dead, of course.

Gi-hun ponders why he named that particular time. He seemed to mention bombs - do they really activate exactly when the second hand gets to the top of the clock face? And then, if he doesn't call them, will that mean he was still there at that moment? Gi-hun exhales softly in an attempt to calm himself down. He looks at the slightly tense looking vampire, who has suddenly gone quiet, obviously realizing the same thing he did. The finger on his trigger trembles.

He doesn't need to look at the time. A moment passes, another. He hears a click and for a moment thinks it was the trigger - but then immediately realizes it was the minute and hour hands moving. Click. He stops breathing.

The assistant blurs into a grin - he heard it too.

Gi-hun has to run. Has to try to fight it. Grab the vial and drink it right now, and it doesn't matter if he wins or loses. He must do what is logical, must survive. Knock the gun out of the other man's hands before it's too late, and run for his life. And then maybe get revenge. Find the island. Find the V.I.P.'s. And hit them when they least expect it.

He's not moving. The revolver shakes visibly in the man's hand, but that doesn't mean anything yet. Gi-hun stares into the young vampire's eyes, remembering their first meeting, remembering a time when his gaze was still capable of hypnotizing him, nailing him in place. He thinks back to himself before In-ho interfered with his brain chemistry and doesn't

recognize himself. He was so pathetic! Without a purpose in life, doomed to repeat the same mistakes over and over again. In-ho got him from the rock bottom and tried to put him on a shore to start a new life with a chest of gold, but he refused to come out, and now he's on a parapet, five minutes into the open sea, about to perish in the jaws of another shark, and all he can hope for is that Bluebeard will come and save him by his mere presence, instilling fear in everyone else. Like Prince Charming. Gi-hun thinks - come on, I believe in you, don't you dare let me lose so cruelly! Let me lose every time from now on, but not now. Oh, please, not now.

The silence between them is tense, hard, leaving almost no space for oxygen. Gi-hun feels like these few moments last forever, but he doesn't look away, not even for a moment. And then - he hears something.

Music and a woman's voice singing in a language he doesn't know.

He had a cigarette with his number on it
He gave it over to me, "Do you want it?"
I knew it was wrong but I palmed it.
I saved it, I waited, I called it

They both almost simultaneously lower their eyes to the phone, which was vibrating in the background of the tune, demanding their attention. Gi-hun's heart stops for a few moments, but then starts beating rapidly again, and he exhales, leaning back in his chair and looking up at the vampire again. He looks a little confused, as if he's seen a ghost rather than a phone with an image of a contact calling him.

"You should probably take this," Gi-hun remarks.

The assistant flinches faintly, casting a glance in his direction.

The gun in his hand slowly lowers. He swallows, licks his lips, and then still picks up the phone and brings it to his ear.

"Yes, sir?" his voice is a little unsure, maybe even a little scared if you listen between the lines. "Yes, sir," he says more collected now, and Gi-hun tries to hear In-ho's voice on the other side of the call, to discern exactly what he's saying to him at this moment. He barely-barely hears one of the questions:

"Did he win?"

The assistant looks up at him, pursing his lips for a few moments. "Yes, sir".

"Good".

He needs to hear his voice. A live one, a real one. "Give me the phone," Gi-hun says suddenly, holding out his hand, expecting the assistant to listen to him. He hesitates, but then does it nonetheless. "In-ho?"

In-ho's voice sounds a little different than before - less steady and calm, and still soft. “Beautiful night, isn't it?”

Gi-hun exhales, feeling himself relax, though he hadn't even realized how tense his body was before. He covers his eyes, taking a breath. “I hope this babysitting job pays. It's a little different than how I planned to spend this night”.

In-ho smiles weakly on the other side of the call, and those few moments of silence bring a strange, unexpected comfort. “He's going to take you to the right address. I want to see you,” he says, and, without giving him a chance to respond, drops the call. Gi-hun looks up at the assistant who pretends as if everything is fine, tucking the bag of murbles into his briefcase and getting up from the couch. Smirking quietly, Gi-hun still decides not to comment on everything that's happened yet, only to quietly follow him out of this room and through the club to the exit. A black car is parked at the back entrance, and the assistant opens the back seat door for him. Behind the wheel is a man unfamiliar to Gi-hun, starting the car without a word. Another assistant? Seems more poised and indifferent. Gi-hun scratches the fresh scar on his forearm, glancing at the young vampire.

He smiles calmly at him, holding out a box with a pink bow. “You completely forgot about your prize,” the assistant remarks, and Gi-hun, after hesitating for a couple seconds, takes the box after all. Lowering his gaze, he opens it, revealing the promised vial of red liquid inside. He mentally wonders how many times the vampire had to cut himself to get that much blood out of him. He doesn't think he wants to know the answer, and only purses his lips, tucking the vial into the inside pocket of his jacket.

When they get out of the car, he recognizes the place - the back alley behind the jazz club, he's smoked here a few times on the nights he's come back here looking for In-ho or any word from him. He looks at the familiar door a little confused, and then he hears the assistant calling his name, and turns around. The young man is calmly holding open for him the door, which he opened with one key from the keychain. Gi-hun exhales, trying to convince himself that everything is fine, and steps inside, walking down the concrete steps into some kind of basement.

A basement. *Great.*

The light is already on, even if it is only a dim yellowish lamp hanging from the ceiling. The walls are cold and bare, and the place looks like a bunker. Lots of shelves lined with junk, they divide this room into two parts. Suddenly, when he finally steps from the stairs to the floor, a familiar figure appears from behind one of those shelves, and everything inside Gi-hun immediately warms up. There he is, alive and seemingly more or less unharmed. In-ho's hair is disheveled, his bangs resting on his forehead as if air-dried after he dipped his head in water. He's wearing a black shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and his skin is stained with something black and red - must be coal, ash, and blood. He stares at him, keeping a few steps away for a while, as if he too has decided to study his appearance first.

After a couple of moments, In-ho does come closer and takes him by the chin rather unceremoniously, twirling his head around, obviously to examine his face from all sides. Gi-hun exhales awkwardly, remembering how he stained his face and neck with his own blood.

“Yours?” the vampire asks.

“Yes,” Gi-hun replies, watching In-ho scrutinize every millimeter of his face carefully and slightly tensely. “I did it on purpose. To get attention”.

“Of course you did,” In-ho replies, having stopped squeezing his chin after all, exhaling as if with a sliver of relief himself. Suddenly he lowers his gaze and takes his hand, calmly bare his wrist, pulling up his sleeve, and leans in sharply, sinking his fangs into it and beginning to drink his blood.

Gi-hun is more surprised than anything else, and only flinches as if from a prick before chuckling softly with a dose of awkwardness in his tone. *“Oh, okay,”* he says, just letting him do it, looking around the room uncertainly once more before still looking with some warmth at In-ho again as he lets go of his hand.

Without saying anything else, the vampire suddenly starts groping through his inner pockets, finding what he's looking for soon enough, and pulls out a cigarette from the pack, clamping it between his lips. Gi-hun just watches him, more tired than he's ever seen him before. He pulls out a lighter gun, lighting the tip of the cigarette himself, and then hands the lighter back to Gi-hun, stepping away from him, taking a puff.

The man feels the urge to be kissed by him now, so beautiful, relaxed, but he is suddenly forced out of his thoughts by the voice of a man he didn't expect to see here at all.

“Gi-hun?”

The man shifts his gaze towards the owner of that voice and freezes with his mouth ajar, seeing Sang-woo, wearing a dirty and wrinkled black and white suit. Gi-hun looks around him confusedly, at first not even realizing what's going on, but then his gaze stops on the number in black numerals adorning his once white shirt: 218.

Player 218. Fate really does have a strange sense of humor. Gi-hun exhales, feeling his shoulders slump. In-ho, in turn, exhales smoke and quickly looks around at the two of them, seemingly having managed to forget about all of this amidst all the recent events. “Ah, right... you two”.

“Sang-woo,” Gi-hun exhales, looking at his old friend.

“What are you doing here?” the man asks puzzled, and Gi-hun doesn't know how to answer that, so he doesn't answer in any way, only glancing at In-ho. That, though, turns out to be enough to explain everything in general detail for Sang-woo, and the man presses his lips together, staying in place uncertainly.

Gi-hun's gaze slides over his shoulder, noticing a person he hadn't seen before - a girl with dark hair and a distrustful look, holding onto a shelf of one of the racks. She's wearing the same clothes as Sang-woo, only there's a different number on it, 067, and her white shirt is stained with blood. Judging by the fact that she's not holding her stomach, though, there was no open wound there. Gi-hun shifts his gaze to In-ho.

The vampire calmly exhales the smoke and drops the cigarette butt on the floor, stepping on it with his shoe and brushing his bangs off his forehead. “I value equality and freedom of choice,” he says, looking at them, not at him. “The games are over. We have two winners. Everyone deserves their reward,” he steps away from the wall, slowly approaching the girl, stopping a step away from her, looking down into her incredulous eyes. “So? Money, or eternity, player 67?”

Gi-hun freezes as he looks at her, inwardly praying she hasn't made a mistake.

She thinks for several long moments, keeping her gaze on her savior.

“Money,” she says, and In-ho calmly nods once, then looks at his assistant; he walks over to her, pulling a gold card out of his pocket with his trademark smile.

“You?” In-ho turns her head to Sang-woo, and Gi-hun can see that this choice is proving to be much more difficult for the man; he hesitates for a moment, frozen in indecision, before shifting his gaze behind In-ho's back, to Gi-hun.

Gi-hun shakes his head faintly, a movement that could have easily been overlooked in this dim room. Sang-woo exhales, pursing his lips, and looks at In-ho again, already more determined. “Money”.

“Very well,” the vampire nods calmly, and Player 218 takes the gold card from the assistant's hands uncertainly. In-ho takes one last look at the winners before turning away, waving indifferently towards the door. “Leave, now,” he commands.

The girl, clutching the gold card in her hand so hard that the skin on her palm turns white in some places, almost immediately sidesteps the young man in front of her, heading past Gi-hun towards the stairs, clearly not intending to stay here a moment longer. Sang-woo, on the other hand, tucks the card into his jacket pocket and looks at Gi-hun again, as if trying to unravel some mystery, to figure out what's on his mind. Gi-hun remembers everything he learned about player 218 from In-ho's letter, remembers everything he knows about the games, and as a result only smiles weakly, with some sympathy, and nods at him, as if trying to show him that he'll be fine. Then, Sang-woo, still slow and distrustful, takes steps towards the stairs after all, glancing back at the vampire one last time.

In-ho shifts all his attention back to Gi-hun, stopping less than an arm's length away from him. “What about you?” he asks calmly. “You won, too. Played the hero like you wanted to. Freed the monster from the curse. Your duty is done, the credits are coming up. You can leave the cage with a light heart. Choose money over eternity, like the rest of them. Live a quiet life under the sun”.

Gi-hun smiles weakly as he looks at him and shakes his head. He takes out a vial of dark red blood from his pocket carefully, it's warm in his hand. “I've already made my choice, haven't I?”

“It's a dark life, Gi-hun. You won't be a human anymore,” In-ho remarks softly, tilting his head slightly to the side, looking into his eyes.

"Won't I?" he says, and there is no need for him to explain it. "You seem pretty human to me".

If In-ho wants to tell him that he's not a human, he decides not to; he knows he wouldn't be able to convince Gi-hun that he's still a monster.

“If you drink it, you'll have to entrust your life to me," he says instead. "The effect I'll have on you could be hard for someone who's used to a lifetime of doing impulsive things and being so... willful”.

“I'm pretty sure you're exaggerating,” Gi-hun remarks.

In-ho continues to look at him calmly, only raises his hand, pointing a finger at the assistant, speaking no louder and just as softly: “Pin yourself to the wall,” the simple command sounds, and the assistant, without a moment's hesitation, picks himself up by his tie and shirt, turning his back to the wall and pressing himself against it with a light thud without objection. “See?”

Gi-hun smiles awkwardly, glancing at the assistant who nonchalantly continues to stand with the cloth on his chest clutched in his palm. He sighs, shaking his head, looking at In-ho again. “Looks like I'll have to trust you,” he admits with a slight smile. “It's risky. But no more risky than what I've done before, so... I think I'll be fine”.

In-ho looks into his eyes carefully, as if trying to spot even for a moment the flame of doubt that flickers in them, but Gi-hun calmly endures the look, and then the vampire sighs, nodding slowly, lowering his gaze to the area around his neck before looking at his assistant and taking a few steps in his direction.

“You have his blood on you,” he sounds deceptively calm, but the assistant immediately opens his mouth to justify himself, knowing that playing with his master's anger could be dangerous.

“It was his idea,” he points at Gi-hun with his free hand. In-ho freezes for a couple moments before he exhales and turns around, looking at the man waiting for an explanation.

Gi-hun smiles awkwardly. “Yeah, I... lost a couple times. Nothing serious, really. It's fine”.

“You let him drink your blood?” he asks, and Gi-hun shrugs awkwardly, looking like an innocent dog who came home after a rainstorm, having bathed in a muddy puddle and now dripping onto the white carpet in the living room. In-ho closes his eyes and exhales to calm himself down, and looks again at his assistant who continues to hold himself against the wall. *“Okay.* I don't have time for this right now. Go wash your face of this blood and get me something to wear to the airport in the morning. And buy tickets for the afternoon flight,” he says with a wave of his palm and the assistant, nodding, immediately heads outside up the stairs.

They are left alone now. In-ho looks at Gi-hun again, thoughts tensely swirling in his head. Gi-hun doesn't look away, feeling, after these unbearably long days apart, finally in his place, calm.

The vampire takes the vial from his hands, tucking it away in his pants pocket. “Let's take a little time with this, okay?” he finally says, breaking the silence.

Gi-hun smiles slightly. “What, haven't drunk enough of my blood yet?” he jokes, but he doesn't protest at this careful decision of In-ho's to postpone his conversion for a while. In part, he was even grateful for it - he'd still like to feel more stable and know more details before diving headfirst into this. Now was not the right time, and he understood that.

In-ho chuckled weakly, shaking his head. “No, that's not it,” he replies. “Vampires can drink each other's blood, it won't be a problem. It actually has an even stronger effect. Almost like an aphrodisiac,” In-ho tells.

“Oh”.

“I just want to...” the vampire sighs, pausing before continuing. “I want to look at you in the sunlight. At least a couple more times,” he says honestly, and Gi-hun catches himself smiling warmly at him, his features softening and his shoulders relaxing. In-ho looks almost awkward as he says this, but quickly gathers his thoughts, regaining his calm demeanor. “So I'm asking you to indulge me. Will you do that?”

He has the nerve to sound almost like he's discussing business, and it makes Gi-hun chuckle, shaking his head. In-ho continues to stand a step away from him, doing nothing, so he decides to take matters into his own hands and takes his hand in his own, shortening that distance a bit. Lowering his gaze to the other man's palm, he is about to say something when suddenly notices a red burn adorning the fingers and almost the entire of his left hand. This causes him to tighten his lips fleetingly, and he gently strokes the sensitive skin of his sun-wounded hand with the pads of his fingers.

In-ho can't help but notice this, and only sighs heavily.

“Does it hurt?” Gi-hun asks, because he can't help but ask.

The vampire leaves that question unanswered. Instead, he forces his head up with his right hand, cupping his chin with it, and, connecting with the man's gaze, draws him lower, closer to himself, to seal the silence between them with a kiss, gentle, warm, not at all like their first one. The only thing it resembles it is the taste of Gi-hun's blood on In-ho's tongue.

The blood is indeed seems to be sweet.

Gi-hun can't hold back his laughter as he walks beside him through the airport, and In-ho pretends to ignore it with absolute dignity. Hidden from the sun under his hoodie, leather gloves, face mask, and dark glasses, he looks silly, and realizes it perfectly well himself. Well, at least Gi-hun is amused by it. He gets his revenge while standing in line before boarding the plane, lowering his mask with two fingers and reaching for Gi-hun's ear as if intending to say something to him, biting his delicate neck at the last moment instead. Watching his cheeks turn red as they go through passport control turns out to be extremely amusing.

The Maldives does have a lot of sunshine, but that makes the moonlit walk even more enjoyable. For the first time in his long life, getting away from the endless Groundhog Day, with the constant preparation of games, their conduct and socializing with the VIPs, it all seems like the kind of vacation he never even tried to dream of. And while everyone on the news is discussing the explosion on an island in South Korean waters, In-ho watches the morning sun streaming through the ajar curtains of their bedroom, falling on the dark, disheveled hair of his sleeping husband, tired after another sleepless night.

In-ho walks over to the window, closing the curtains carefully, letting the room sink into complete darkness, and approaches Gi-hun quietly, leaving a kiss on his forehead. The man moves under the blanket, saying something indistinct, and In-ho smiles just a bit.

As the sun sets, he wakes him up with kisses down his shoulder and lower, along his shoulder blades and the line of his spine, slowly pulling the thin white blanket aside to expose more of his skin to himself. Then bares his fangs - not in a serious, but more like in a playful way - and scratches his side, causing Gi-hun to try to fight it off with a pillow as if he was tickled. In-ho laughs softly then, and turns him over deftly in one calm motion to look into his sleepy eyes. “Argh, you're a menace, In-ho,” Gi-hun says, closing his eyes and resting his head back on the pillows, but In-ho, smirking, is immediately at his neck, caressing it with lazy kisses.

“You forgot to close the curtains again,” he says, looming over him, looking into his eyes, hands resting in the mattress on either side of his head. “When you become a vampire, that forgetfulness could cost you a painful burn. Or worse”.

“Maybe I left them ajar *on purpose* so you'd *finally* let me have some sleep,” Gi-hun mutters sleepily, reaching up to poke his chest with his index finger. “And stop making excuses to avoid turning me into a vampire for another extra year. You know, I won't always be as young, fresh, and beautiful as I am now,” he jokes, and In-ho looks at him calmly.

“You will never look any different to me”.

Gi-hun stares into his eyes in response, letting this moment linger, these words leave their mark on his memory. Then, he chuckles. “Ah, you always find an elegant way to evade a serious conversation, show-off”.

In-ho doesn't hold back a slight smirk, touching the patterns of hickeys and small bite dots on his neck with his fingertips. “I'll bring you breakfast in bed, my dear,” he says before leaving a light kiss on his lips and getting out of bed, walking off in the direction of the kitchen.

Gi-hun sighs looking up at the ceiling. “You could have breakfast in bed too,” he remarks, causing In-ho to stop at the door for a few moments. Turning his head in his direction, Gi-hun manages to notice him laughing quietly before walking away after all. He smiles.

And that might be just one of the best feelings in his world.

Chapter End Notes

the end!

thank you all so much for following this work, reading it and leaving your comments, they always made me smile and motivated me to write more heh <3

and now, as a little treat, a few moments that for one reason or another didn't make it into the work:

1. If you thought the Assistant might be in love with In-ho, you weren't imagining things lol. The boy has daddy issues (he ran away from an abusive home at 14 after MURDERING his dad cmon), psychopathic tendencies, and a penchant for addiction. Of course he has feelings for In-ho in some way, even if they are not reciprocated. Was there something between them at any point in the past? It's up to you really. Personally I don't know (even though I'm the author, lol)

2. The tune that plays when In-ho calls him is “you can be the boss” by Lana Del Rey. I thought it fit them perfectly. “he tells me to shut up, I got this” and all that

3. Despite ALL the things the Assistant manages to say to Gi-hun during their game, Gi-hun ends up not telling In-ho about this, largely because he realizes that the Assistant was just bad-mouthing him cause he himself was being worried about In-ho in his own way. So he's alive (only thanks to Gi-hun).

4. The decision to save Sang-woo and Sae-byeok was made by In-ho because he thought it would be humane. He also helped Sae-byeok with her wound (well it was a mutually beneficial thing, he needed to eat lol). He wanted to prove to himself that Gi-hun could be right. In a way, as he sat in the boat with them, he was surprised at the decision himself.

5. Sang-woo is smart, and he knows Gi-hun well enough to guess what's going on (in general terms). He's probably considering many different possibilities, including that Gi-hun also won in some past game, but he'll never know for sure

6. Sang-woo chose money because his original goal in the games was to make money to help his mom and impress her, to make her proud of him. He doesn't need immortality for that (he takes the thought of his death too lightly to wish for something like that, too). Sae-byeok chose money because immortality would hardly help her take care of her brother, and she also doesn't want to get involved in all this weird stuff. In-ho drank her blood, I think she was left under a certain impression and just wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. I mean, good for her.

7. In-ho often argues with Gi-hun about everything in the world, just because he enjoys watching him emotionally defend his opinion. Gi-hun also wins a toy for him from the vending machine (it took him ten tries, but he's stubborn and not used to giving up; In-ho looked at him with this intense stare of his and thought, damn he is so stupid I wanna kiss him).

8. In-ho re-learns how to cook for him, and he also sometimes turns on “can't take my eyes off you” while he's doing it. One day, Gi-hun walks up to him at that moment, and

they end up dancing in the kitchen. Gi-hun notices a tear running down In-ho's cheek and kisses it without saying anything.

let me know if you want some more, I may make a post on tumblr lol - it's @maria-rayro

BONUS

Chapter Summary

Gi-hun's life as a vampire. Sweet, sexy and a little silly - just the way In-ho likes him.

Chapter Notes

YAY BONUS CHAPTER

it's a little kinky though

Being a newly turned vampire was definitely a unique experience. The first few days were horrible, painful, but he knew, deep down, that he was safe in those moments, that In-ho was there for him, never leaving his side. He gave him his blood, watching Gi-hun drink it greedily, grasping his body with a grip too tight. He held him in his arms when the painful heat made the man want nothing more than to howl and sob. He whispered soothing things to him in his soft and calm voice, and it was as if that alone was already making Gi-hun feel better. And he couldn't even think at that moment that this could have been almost as hard for In-ho as it was for him. He still didn't know that the Assistant had to remind the man to eat. In-ho couldn't drink Gi-hun's blood at that moment, and so the Assistant provided his own, keeping an eye on the house and running little errands in between. It had been a rough few days.

But even afterward, things were... weird. Drinking In-ho's blood from that little glass jar was one thing, but clamping his neck with his jaw, piercing the skin, feeling the hot blood flowing down his throat and below, it felt different. It was the most nourishing and delicious thing Gi-hun had tasted in his entire life, and it... it was strange.

He had pretty good restraint for a newly turned vampire, In-ho had told him that and speculated that it was all about a combination of his stubbornness and empathy. Gi-hun didn't care, and was just relieved that he wasn't throwing himself at people on the street when they were having a night out.

He'd learned to fear the sun in advance, picking up the habit when he'd shielded slightly paranoid In-ho from any random ray. So that part wasn't so hard. He might start to miss the sun in a few years, but for now he didn't feel any special feelings - he was used to spending his days sleeping off after his and In-ho's nighttime walks anyway. So that wasn't a problem.

It was much harder to get used to how strong he was now. Before, he hadn't even realized what amazing self-control In-ho had, making love to him without accidentally breaking his leg. He himself, not expecting such a turn of events, had managed to break several glasses by clutching them too tightly in his hands, and the handle on the door by pulling it the wrong way. In-ho found it extremely funny, but Gi-hun panicked, overthinking, fearing that he would accidentally pet the cat too hard during another walk or do something else like that. As a result, the man had to help him better feel his body, to not use his full strength in such little things. Gi-hun was still learning, and still didn't pet cats.

Because he couldn't help himself at times, using In-ho as his juice box, they had even more sex now than at any other time in their relationship. Just a couple drops of his 'master's' blood on his tongue, and Gi-hun couldn't help but feel the fire of desire inside him, and could In-ho ever say no to him? Their bodies were stronger, more durable than those of humans (especially at their age), and did they have any reason not to take advantage of such a wonderful opportunity, especially when it felt so good? And what else were they supposed to do in the daylight, now that sleep wasn't necessary for any of them?

At night, they continued to go on dates, walking around the new city they had moved to not too long ago. They visited new bars, clubs, sometimes casinos, and sometimes museums and art galleries. At times they would just walk along the beach, or visit some local market in the late evening. And when Gi-hun started to feel a little bad due to the fact of his recent turning (it was like random bouts of hunger and cold, along with a strange desire for something, and he could guess what this something was), the man simply tugged In-ho by the sleeve of his jacket every time he turned to face him, and kissed him, paying absolutely no attention to where they were, because no one could see them both if they didn't want to. And it was working, it was getting easier for him to bear these moments, while also having a good time. In-ho continued to watch him with the same interest all the time, keeping his eyes on him while he was talking to someone at the market or trying to win some stupid thing for him at the slot machine, spending his money.

Perhaps the most absurd thing was this strange hunting instinct that sometimes made him do stupid things without even realizing it. For example, once he had led In-ho on a night stroll through the city streets, and only after half an hour had he realized that his entire route was determined by some stray cat walking ahead and sometimes even hiding from view. He was telling stories all this time, not even paying attention to how he sometimes chose very strange paths, for example, through the fence of a closed construction site, and increased the speed of his steps, so as not to fall too far behind his “prey”. In-ho tried not to laugh and just watched him, and then when Gi-hun realized that they were in an abandoned construction site, he couldn't stand it and kissed him, pulling him closer by the collar of his shirt. Then, pulling back a little, he looked into his face with a calm smile before still saying, “take this cat in your arms and cuddle her; it'll be easier that way, you'll feel the satisfaction of a successful hunt, darling”. It was then that Gi-hun realized what he had been doing for the past half hour.

He felt a little bad for the cat, so he didn't let her out of his arms until they reached the store to buy her some food. Then In-ho just offered to take her home. Gi-hun was happy, and it wasn't about the successful result of his “hunt” at all. They had a cat now!

“Has he done something like that?” Gi-hun asked then, carrying the cat in his arms while In-ho carried what felt like ten bags of stuff they had bought for her.

In-ho didn't need to elaborate to know who he meant. “We had a lot of staff for something like this back then. It started a week after his turning, pretty early. Chased one poor young man into a mop closet. Then for a few weeks crept up on him constantly from behind. It was three weeks before he got my permission to bite him - before that he didn't have enough self-control to stop in time. I had to keep him in check. You're... more harmless.”

“Thank goodness,” Gi-hun chuckled then. “And... what about you?” he asked cautiously.

In-ho was silent for a few moments. “Because of the dead blood I drank, I evolved a bit slower than anticipated. But in the end, I started chasing people too. Just strangers on the street, then criminals... I was more restrained than he was, but less humane than you. He liked scaring people, I enjoyed staying in the shadows. As for you... you never hide your face. Except when we kiss in public, of course, which characterizes you more as a shy person than a stealthy vampire”.

Gi-hun snorted, carefully continuing to stroke the cat in his hands. “Some of us have to have some decency. It's rude to eat each other like that in public”.

“Is that the verb you decided to use? *Really?”*

“Hey, you picked me. You should have read the small print before you bonded with me with those eternal ties of yours. There's no turning back now,” Gi-hun smirked smugly. “You'll have to put up with my jokes forever, dear”.

“Ah, what was I thinking?”

There was one more thing, of course, the one that had been bothering In-ho the most all this time. Gi-hun belonged to him now, and that was for good, until death do them part, literally. He couldn't live away from him for long, couldn't resist his will. In-ho had to be doubly careful with his words now, especially during their arguments, because he hated the moments when one sloppy wording would silence Gi-hun. Gi-hun tried not to think about it too much, just trusting him completely, focusing on the positive effects of their new strong bond, and not harboring grudges against him. After all, even this aspect of chemistry between them could be used for the good of their relationship.

They lived in a not-too-big house located away from the city, with a comfortable basement where they felt safer during the day. They would usually return an hour before dawn, and Gi-hun would look for the cat first thing while In-ho unloaded the shopping and got ready for the day. Afterward, they would both go downstairs to rest, and usually Gi-hun would be the first one in bed, with the older vampire joining him later.

So now, he closes the door after finishing upstairs, glancing around at the man lying on several blankets, waiting for him with such a beautiful smile on his face that it makes his heart melt. In-ho quietly steps closer, keeping his gaze on him, and finally climbs elegantly onto the bed, slowly leaning in to steal a long, tender kiss that quickly becomes greedy. Their breathing hitches, and after a couple moments, he still gently presses Gi-hun's chest to lean

back, and the touch of their lips is broken. “Someone's hungry,” he teases, looking at the man's elongated fangs with a smirk. He can't help but remember now how just a month ago this amazing man was able to convince him to finally make him a vampire, only once whispering hotly in his ear the sweet “imagine what it would feel like, me biting you”. And god, he'd have to be careful what he wished for, because what had made him dizzy at the time, he was now getting in full, almost every day. At first, it was so much that Gi-hun even began to worry at one point if he was hurting him by drinking so much of his blood every day. In-ho only bit him instead of answering.

“You can just give me a drink if you're not ready yet,” Gi-hun, caring as ever, tells him, even though it's obvious he wants nothing in this world as much as to bite him. It's an amazing resilience. Deep down, In-ho feels curious as to what would prove stronger, his will or the newly born's moral principles, but he was in no hurry to put it to the test. Sincerity was too precious to lose for the sake of experimentation.

“Let me take off my shirt, I don't want you to stain it with my blood again,” In-ho says simply, kissing him once more briefly on the lips before pulling away and starting to remove his clothes, keeping his gaze on Gi-hun. That impossible desire, that hunger that was obvious in his eyes, in his breathing, in his mouth ajar with its charmingly protruding sharp fangs, was the best thing In-ho had ever seen in this world. He throws his shirt off somewhere on the floor as he continues to sit up, straddling Gi-hun's hips, and reaches out to pull him closer, chest bumping against chest, lips against lips, and who would have thought fangs would get in the way of kissing like that?

In-ho pulls him away from his lips by his hair and guides him to the curve of his neck, and Gi-hun doesn't need to be told twice. A moment later, his sharp fangs pierce the vampire's tough skin and he begins to drink his blood, as sloppy and as if even barbarically charming as ever. In-ho throws his head back as he continues to stroke his hair, looking up at the ceiling at first, but then closing his eyes after all. If he had to make a list of the best feelings in the world, this would definitely be in the top five. He can't think of anyone else's fangs, anyone else's mouth that he would let do this to him, but Gi-hun is exceptional. He's exceptional at everything.

He's also exceptionally sloppy, and In-ho can feel his precious blood flowing in several paths from his neck wound down his torso. It's already a routine. He grips Gi-hun's hair tighter at the back of his neck to gently but insistently force it back from his body like he was a leech, and the man understands him without further ado. They look into each other's eyes, and In-ho realizes he's never seen a more beautiful picture than Gi-hun stained in his blood. He thrusts forward like a wild animal off the chain and kisses him with all the passion he can muster, while the fog in his head from the loss of blood still hasn't cleared and continues to shut down his mind in favor of his primitive senses. Gi-hun lets out a groan into the kiss.

Next to him, he himself forgets to be organized at times like this, so soon another sheet is torn, unable to withstand the force with which he pulls it, clenching it in his fist, and the mattress is soaked with blood. Gi-hun continues to bite, but no longer drinking it, as if he's just grinding his teeth and he's nothing more than a favorite toy he doesn't want to let out of his mouth. Needless to say, that beautiful mouth needed to be away from his cock for a while. Well, there are plenty of other ways to get pleasure anyway.

How open Gi-hun always was during sex was mesmerizing. In-ho has to pin him to the bed, keeping his hand on his chest with steady strength while the fingers of his other hand move painfully leisurely inside his beautiful body. And Gi-hun really makes it hard, with that fire in his eyes and blood on his face, with those wonderful pitiful whimpers and swear words mixed with pleas, but what is In-ho if not his composure? Gi-hun was so cocky and flirtatious today, joking around with a stranger at the bar right in front of him, knowing full well how strong In-ho's possessiveness is. It was literally his way of saying, *"I don't want you to be gentle and romantic tonight, make me remember that I'm yours"* and they both knew it perfectly well. Well, be careful what you wish for.

There was something they hadn't tried yet, and it kept making In-ho's head spin. Entering him at last, he stiffens for a while, giving the man time to get used to the feeling of being filled, and reaches up to cup his chin. Leaning in, he kisses him long and smoothly, then pulls back a little to look into his eyes. His own blood feels delicious on his tongue. "Do you remember you have the right to speak up against anything at any time, despite any of my other orders?" he asks, continuing to hold his chin tightly with his fingers, not even giving him a chance to look away. Gi-hun tries to nod, but it's not enough. "With words, my love".

"Yes! Yes, I do, I know," Gi-hun says, impatience evident in his voice and in the way he tries to move his hips towards him. In-ho tsks, teasingly and disapprovingly, but makes one rhythmic motion, almost leaving the man's body and following smoothly inside at full length, making him gasp.

"I'm going to give you an order now. I don't want you to be scared. It won't make sense if you don't enjoy it," he says another preamble, continuing to watch Gi-hun beneath him trying to breathe, trying not to crumble into hundreds of little pieces from the next random movement. He looks into his eyes, so open and sincere now, and In-ho, after waiting a little longer, still lets the instruction fly from his lips. "You will not cum until I let you. Is that understood?"

Gi-hun makes a broken sound, trying desperately to nod a few times, his eyes closing. Dark strands stick to his forehead. "Yes. Yes..."

In-ho kisses a third "yes" off his lips while simultaneously beginning to move inside him, setting a slow pace at first, but soon changing to a determined and forceful one, coaxing moans and cries out of his lover with each new thrust. He scratches at his back with his nails, haphazardly, chaotically, his head thrown back on the pillows, exposing his neck, and In-ho falls to it, but only kisses. He slides his lips over the old scar marks, runs his tongue from his ear along his jaw line and to his caddy, scratches with his fangs, and only then does he allow himself to playfully bite him, tasting a little of his sweet blood. Gi-hun cries out beneath him, so sweet and desirable that it pushes him himself over the edge, and he cums deep inside him, stopping, catching his breath, lazily kissing his neck.

He only hesitates for a couple moments, but then Gi-hun whimpers pitifully, and In-ho remembers his little instruction. He straightens up, looking down at him now, having moved out of his body, and feels a shiver in his own at the sight of him. So sensitive now, on the edge of his pleasure without a single opportunity to jump down. He's almost shaking, hands reaching for In-ho to pull him back closer, but the man has a different plan.

He strokes his thigh deceptively comfortingly, looking into his face, and Gi-hun sobs, clutching the sheet in his fingers in such a way that it immediately tears. “Shh, look at me, my love,” In-ho says, and Gi-hun can't help but obey, opening his eyes moist with tears that are starting to fall. So emotional, so sensitive. “That's it. Good boy. You can do it, you know that? Just relax and enjoy yourself. Try it,” he tells him gently and then moves lower and lower until his lips cover the head of his hard cock. Gi-hun, who had just tried to relax by resting his head back on the pillows, is now like a taut string again, and he whimpers as In-ho moves his tongue painfully slow and agonizingly perfect over his cock, sucking on it, effortlessly hiding his fangs and letting it go as deep as he can. And then, he quickens the pace.

Gi-hun is falling to pieces. “Oh *please* please please please In-ho, *please*, I can't, I can't, I... *oh god, oh shit,* please please *please* let me, *please...”* he pleads, feeling like he's hanging over an abyss on a very thin thread that's miraculously holding his weight. It is the sweetest torture in the world, but it is still torture, and hot tears roll down his face, mingling with the blood of his master, his lover, his husband.

His eyes are full of hope as In-ho releases him from his mouth and rises to his face. In-ho's palms hug his face, kissing him long, lovingly. He collects his tears with his lips, licking away the remnants of his blood before pulling back a little to look into his eyes. He still holds him in his hands. *“Not yet,”* he says softly, and Gi-hun sobs, closing his eyes and throwing his head back. Another kiss lands in the corner of his eye. *“I want you to love me first,”* he whispers into his ear, and Gi-hun lets out a broken whimper just from those words alone.

In-ho pulls away, still admiring him, and then reaches for the lube hidden somewhere in the folds of the ruined sheet. He doesn't touch Gi-hun, giving him a little time to come down from cloud seven to at least cloud six, and methodically stretches himself, impatient, heated again. Is it the feeling of power over Gi-hun, or the realization of Gi-hun's power over him? The lines have long since blurred.

When he realizes that should be enough, he kisses his man again, lewdly, tongue colliding with tongue and playfully tickling his fangs, then rolls over with him so that Gi-hun is on top. It may be cruel, considering how his knees are trembling now, but In-ho is all too eager to feel his impatience, his openness, his primitive wildness. He spreads his legs for him, and Gi-hun doesn't even hesitate a moment this time, as he's always done before. Every time In-ho has offered himself to him, Gi-hun has been so charmingly awkward and cautious, and it's been beautiful - but what In-ho sees now delights him just as much.

He enters him fully at once, making the man draw in a little air through his teeth in pain, but that pain immediately turns to pleasure as Gi-hun bites his neck again, ungracefully, giving in to his instincts without even thinking about it. He moves inside him, immediately going to a fast pace, no mercy in the way he thrusts into him each time. This is new.

When Gi-hun pulls away from his neck, he's immediately drowned in a batch of new moans, pleas, and the ever so cute “do you like that?”, “am I good?” questions.

In-ho pulls him a little farther away from him by his hair so he can look him in the eyes. His own cheeks are no less red than Gi-hun's face right now, this act definitely makes his heart pump blood with double force. The man doesn't stop for a moment, tears in the corners of his

eyes, and he's so unbearably handsome now, always. He looks at him, trying so hard to please him, to be perfect for him, just to get a simple permission, to catch up with the pleasure running away from him. That look, In-ho has never seen anything more beautiful. And then-

He should have realized what was happening when Gi-hun wrapped his palm around his dick. Should have known, but he himself was already a mess at that moment - but became an even bigger mess once the man squeezed at its base, keeping him from cumming. In-ho lets out a groan, and Gi-hun doesn't even need to say anything, because his message is crisp and clear in its primitive simplicity. In-ho smirks a sharp smile.

“What a cunning man you are,” he says, a chuckle from his lips. He runs his tongue over his fangs, taking a few breaths giving himself time to rest before still giving a new instruction. “When I'm done, then you can too,” In-ho says, and that's certainly enough, even more than enough.

The hand on his cock begins to move, and Gi-hun resumes the movements inside him, just as fast and unrestrained, chaotic in nature. And that's a lot, especially coupled with the beautiful desperate sounds he hears, and so after a dozen sweet seconds he cum with a soundless moan, and just a couple moments later Gi-hun is pouring deep inside him, whimpering in the final waves of his excessive pleasure.

He collapses next to him on his back. No sheet underneath them, just a blood-stained mattress, but they both don't care. Their minds are completely blank, and for a while they both don't move, regaining their breath and strength after so many milliliters of blood spent.

In-ho comes to his senses first, of course. He turns to look at Gi-hun lying next to him, and reaches out to stroke his hair. Usually he was so talkative afterward, but right now the man was too exhausted to say anything, and so In-ho doesn't try to ask him anything, just enjoying the view and stroking his cheek gently.

It's only when their cat starts insistently scratching at the basement door that In-ho sighs heavily and gets out of bed. He prepares the bathroom for them while the man tries to convince the cat that this sheet is going to the trash rather than left lying on the floor by the bed for her. Temporarily losing this battle, he gives up when In-ho calls him into the bathroom, and for the next half hour they just lie in warm water together while the vampire washes the new convert's hair and occasionally asks him something quietly, keeping the conversation comfortable. When they're done, Gi-hun wraps himself in a warm white robe and lies down on the couch next to In-ho, who's reading a book. Cat-like, the man puts his head in his lap, and In-ho burrows his fingers into his hair without taking his eyes off his reading.

“Can I make a cat a vampire?” Gi-hun asks at one point, and In-ho freezes for a couple moments before, without saying anything, taking the book aside to look down at Gi-hun with a mute question in his eyes. “I can't imagine living forever without her... and if one turns a cat into a vampire, will it also obey its master's will?”

In-ho doesn't hold back a smile, looking at his face now. “A vampire can only turn its own kind, I'm afraid”.

Gi-hun purses his lips thoughtfully. The silence doesn't last long, though. “Do you think there are vampire cats?” he asks with a serious look, and In-ho laughs with fangs, throwing his head back.

In hindsight, maybe this really is the best way to spend the rest of his eternity.

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